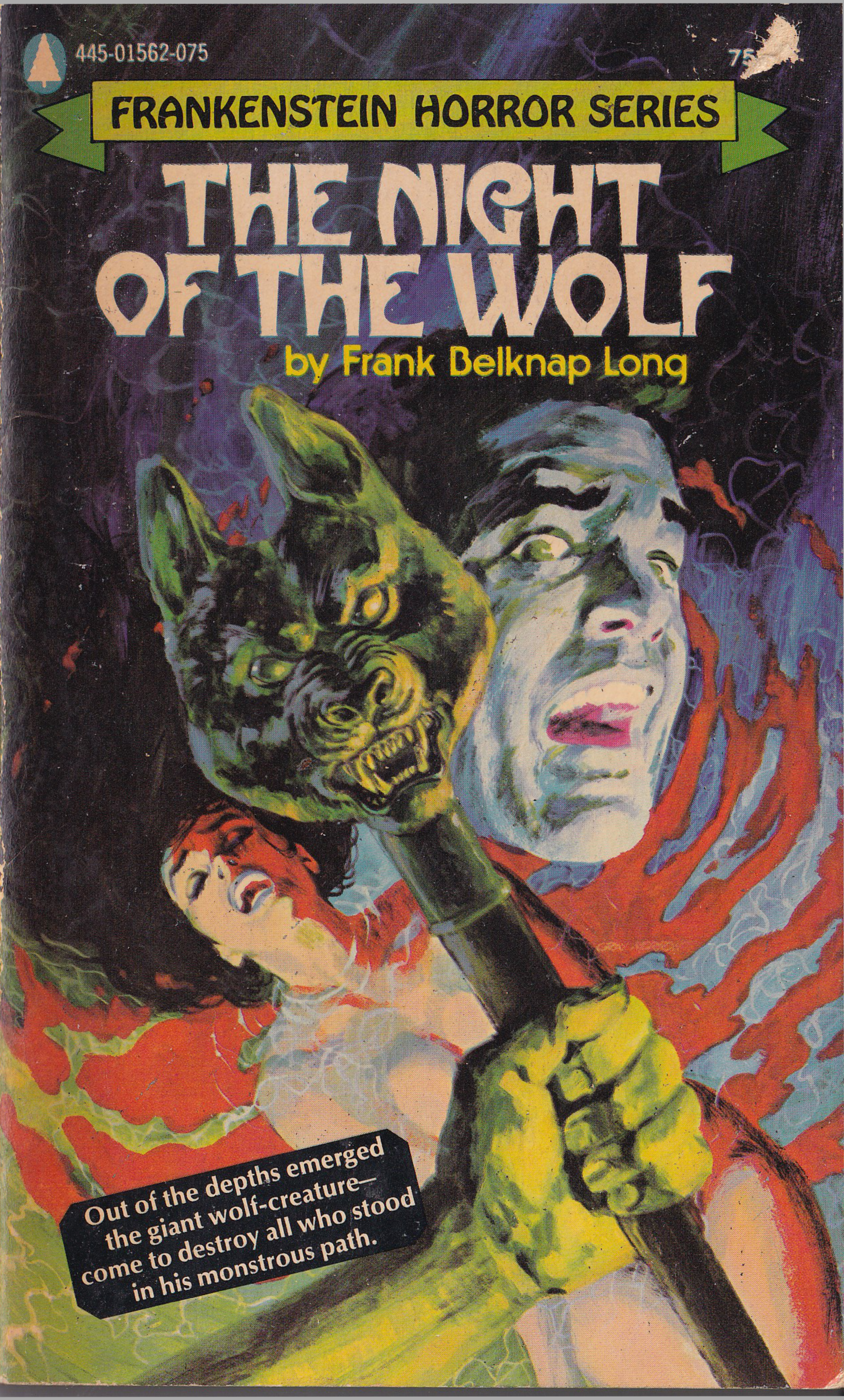
445-01562-075

75

FRANKENSTEIN HORROR SERIES

THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF

by Frank Belknap Long



Out of the depths emerged the giant wolf-creature—come to destroy all who stood in his monstrous path.

HOUR OF THE WOLF . . .

The wolf was staring at her now, its enormous eyes so bright that its teeth seemed edged with fire. Its pointed ears were so aglow that they looked like tapers of flame. Its body was poised and ready to leap.

She could not take her eyes from him although her face was ashen. Her fright was so great that she was incapable of moving, of running and running and never stopping . . .

THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF

by Frank Belknap Long

POPULAR LIBRARY • NEW YORK

All POPULAR LIBRARY books are carefully selected by the POPULAR LIBRARY Editorial Board and represent titles by the world's greatest authors.

POPULAR LIBRARY EDITION

Copyright © 1972 by International Book Associates

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

All Rights Reserved

CHAPTER ONE

When I first saw Margrave sitting by the library window with his head slightly bent and the sunlight slanting down over his tousled blond hair, I thought that he had removed a book from the wall-to-ceiling shelf that towered at his back and was so lost in its contents that my heavy tread had fallen on deaf ears.

I am a big-boned, big-framed man and treading lightly has always been difficult for me. I have to make a conscious effort, or the floor is likely to creak a little at my approach and warn people that they are about to be deprived of the luxury of solitude. Solitude can be a very treasured thing, and I've always valued it so highly that I know exactly how much an unanticipated footfall can be resented at times.

Margrave was the opposite of short-tempered, and in the dozen years I'd known him he had never flown off the handle because of something I'd done or failed to do. But simple reproach can be conveyed in a very intense way, and Margrave could look at you with his eyes turned into revolving spindles of light that signaled his displeasure too unmistakably to be ignored.

I half-expected him to turn and look directly at me before I'd advanced ten feet into the room. But he remained motionless and I was almost at his side before I realized he would never move again.

The entire left side of his head—the side not visible from the door—had been crushed in so hideous a way that the bulge of his forehead had become welded to his cheek-bones in a continuous ridge of shattered bone that extended to the tip of his jaw. The flesh of his cheek was shredded as if a buzzsaw had passed down over it, leaving thin flaps of skin dangling from a dozen separate splinters of bone that turned what was left of his features into a horrible red-white disfigurement.

It was so dreadful a sight it seemed to rise up and smite me in an almost physical way, sending shock waves through me that tightened the muscles of my stomach and squeezed the breath from my lungs, making it almost impossible for me to breathe.

If there is such a thing as a silent screaming, it must have been what I experienced for a second or two, for I had the feeling that my lips were moving soundlessly and yet filling the room with sound.

The window through which the sunlight was streaming was of the tall casement type, with sashes that opened outward on hinges, and I could see almost all of the front lawn fringed with magnolia shrubs in full summertime bloom. All of the flowers seemed to turn from pink to crimson as I stared, except the few that were white. The white ones did not change. It was as if the view beyond the window was taking on an aspect not too different from Margrave's battered face.

There was no weapon lying on the floor at his feet, which could only mean that someone had made off with the bludgeon which had wrought such havoc, either by fleeing across the lawn and into the woods beyond or back through the house before I'd come into the room. But there was no trail of blood leading from the window to the door, so that it seemed more likely that the fatal blow or blows had been struck by an intruder from outside the house, perhaps just by leaning forward across the sill, and committing an act of brutal violence without setting foot in the room.

Even if the weapon had failed to drip, someone passing from the window to the door could hardly have failed to leave at least one small, telltale sign to mark his passing, such as spilled ashes from a jarred ashtray or a tilted lampshade or crumpled rug, and there was nothing in the room that seemed in the least disarranged.

I suddenly saw myself doing what I was still incapable of—turning about and rushing out into the hall. Not to summon help, exactly, for Margrave was clearly beyond help, but to alert the household and do everything possible to ease the terrible shock that might well make Doris Margrave crumple to the floor in a dead faint the instant she was told.

There are moments of heightened consciousness, no matter how tortured, that can make the memories of a half-dozen human relationships come flooding into the mind in an interval of time barely longer than it would take to lower a windowshade in a house of mourning or cross a narrow street against a high wind.

It had always seemed incredible to me that a man as youthful-looking as Margrave could have had a daughter of nineteen, for he could still have passed for a college athlete who was a little older than most, but still in there winding in and out between a mad scramble of sturdily built young giants on their way to the goal line. It was even harder to think of him as a scholar who had collaborated with me on a dozen books and been my close associate in his chosen—our chosen—field for ten years.

A book a year, and each year it had seemed more and more likely that I would end up as his son-in-law while he was still a young man. No, it had only seemed likely for three years, for Doris had been sixteen before that thought had occurred to either of us. But I could remember telling her, when she had been no more than ten, that she would someday marry an archeologist and lose him for months every year to some verdigris-encrusted artifacts dug up on the opposite side of the world. I could remember telling her also that the joy of reunions could be heightened by separation, and it was nothing she needed to become alarmed about.

If Margrave had not been a widower I would have had two women to be concerned about now, but that, in a way, would have made it easier for me, because there can be no substitute for a mother's support in a moment of shared grief, no matter how close to collapse they both might be. And I was far from sure I would be able to console Doris other than awkwardly, while inwardly engaged in fighting off a temptation to crush her in my arms and cover her face with kisses.

I am never at my best at such moments. Strong emotion has a tendency to bring out all of my ingrained shyness, to make me feel absurdly scrupulous about encroaching too much on the inmost feelings of someone else, even someone as precious to me as Doris.

I found myself wondering, so strange and almost irrelevant can be the mind's vagaries when immediate action is inhibited for an instant by shock, if it would be easier or harder for me to console Doris if Margrave had been a poor man and it had not been so big a house, occupied by three servants and two weekend guests beside myself.

Harder, surely, I told myself. It is always a comfort when there are others present when a tragedy has taken place, and they are known to you, and can be counted on for sympathy and support. Even a great and terrible shock becomes a little less overwhelming when it is shared, all apart from the other emotions which the sudden death of a friend cannot fail to evoke.

For a moment every sound in the room seemed to become amplified—the ticking of the very large, circular clock with its ornamental hands on the one wall that wasn't lined with bookcases, the stirring of the window sashes in the faint breeze that was blowing in from the lawn, and even the buzzing of a large, stripe-winged fly high up under the ceiling.

I could have been mistaken, but I seemed to hear as well a faint *drip-dropping,* coming from where Margrave was sitting with the not quite absolute stillness that you feel at times the dead do not ever completely display.

But when I stared down at the floor at the foot of the chair there was no trace of blood collecting into a pool on its hardwood surface. There was a spattering elsewhere, however, on one arm of the chair and on both of his hands but before I could move closer to the window to find out how extensive it might be just below the casement, where his head and shoulders were casting a downward-slanting shadow, another much larger shadow fell across the wall on the opposite side of the room.

I shut my eyes quickly, refusing to believe that I had truly seen it, telling myself that it did not have to be anything real. Not this time, not when I could so easily have imagined it, after so terrible a shock. If I kept my eyes shut and opened them again only when a full minute had gone by, it might well be gone. I might see only a blank wall again, with the circular clock ticking away the seconds—seconds only and not years, never years, and when I'd first seen that shadow fall I'd been younger by close to two years.

It was separated from me by both distance and time and though there had been moments of almost unendurable uncertainty, when I had felt that the distance had dwindled and vanished and it was hovering directly over me—a great animal shape with teeth that could rend and tear—I had prevented it from becoming more than a shadow by refusing to let it weaken my ability to make use of the strength I could still summon to my aid.

It was the strength of total disbelief, and there is no more powerful weapon, surely, against the unknown.

When I opened my eyes the shadow was still darkening the wall. But it had grown fainter and then, quite suddenly, it was gone.

I had never before been able to put the shadow's reappearance so instantly from my mind. What helped me now was my certain knowledge that if I did not succeed in doing so I would never be able to forgive myself for failing Doris when she was more in need of support than at any time in the past.

I didn't stop to look toward the window or the wall again. I was out of the study and hurrying along the hall toward the living room when I heard Doris call out, "Don't wait for me, Helen. I'll join you and Dan at the pool in just a few minutes. I've got to go back upstairs for something I forgot."

I found myself wishing that what I was going to have to tell her could be something so trivial that she could be just as light-hearted about forgetting. The fact that she had a gift for forgetting things of small importance had always seemed to me an enviable quality in her. But now it could not help her, because it had no meaning at all in relation to what had happened.

For an instant I thought of hurrying even faster than I was in an effort to get to the front door before Helen and Daniel Shields could leave the house. But then it would be better, I told myself, to let them go out to the swimming pool while I talked to Doris alone. They could be called back quickly enough and there was no need for the Shieldses or the servants to know before Doris had been told.

The front door was closing just as I reached the living room, but Doris was not on the stairs. She had paused for a moment to rifle through a music score on the baby grand piano that stood in a shadowed alcove to the right of the stairs and she did not turn until I spoke her name. Just her name, for I could hardly trust myself to speak at all.

If my voice broke it would, I knew, have been very bad and I needed a moment longer to make sure that nothing like that would happen.

She swung about abruptly, staring at me with troubled eyes, sensing instantly that something was very wrong. She was wearing the kind of bikini that her father had never been able to accept without misgivings, although he had never said a word to her about it and would not have thought of doing so. I had never given it a second thought, having seen so many even more abbreviated ones. I don't mean that, exactly. Of course I'd given it a thought, but she wore it with the kind of non-self-conscious grace that made it seem as natural to her as breathing.

"What is it, John?" she asked. "You have a half-blinded look. That new Tensor lamp that dad bought last week must be four hundred watts at least. I switched it on just once. You and dad can have it all to yourselves."

"Doris, listen to me," I said. "My eyes are blurry because I—"

I thought for a moment I couldn't go on. But I knew that I had to. She'd know in a moment anyway and if I faltered now, or became even slightly evasive, it would be a long while before she could bring herself to forgive me.

"Your father is dead," I said. "He is sitting in a chair by the window. It wasn't—a sudden heart attack. Someone came in through the window and killed him."

She swayed, but didn't cry out. She didn't say anything at all. She just continued to stare at me, her lips shaking, almost all of the color ebbing from her face. There was a slight, lingering trace of stunned disbelief in her eyes. But it was vanishing fast, and in another moment, I knew, she would be completely alone in her agony, despite my nearness.

I reached out and took firm hold of her arm. "There are blows that can't be softened," I told her. "Shocks that can't be eased. Only a fool—and a cruel one—would let himself think otherwise."

Her voice, when it finally came, was a choked affirmation. "Yes, I know. You did right, John. I'm stronger than you may think. Strength in adversity is a Margrave family trait, and it would be strange if I didn't inherit a little of it from dad. God, God, how I will miss him!"

She did not ask me how he had been killed, perhaps because, despite what she had said, her courage would falter if I told her the end had not come swiftly and mercifully.

I was almost sure it had come swiftly. But a knife or a pistol would have been more merciful, because he'd probably seen the bludgeonlike weapon descending and experienced a moment of mind-shattering horror. In all likelihood there had been more than one blow, delivered with unsparing brutality.

Since she would have to know, her failure to ask me immediately left me torn with uncertainty. If I said nothing more it would be harder to keep her from finding out directly by rushing into the study the instant her first shock became a little less overwhelming. But how could I convince her that she must not do that, unless I made it very plain that what she would see would be too terrible for her to endure? She should wait until I returned with the servants and phoned for the sheriff and helped her upstairs to her room, where it would be best for her to remain until Dr. Saunders felt it all right for her to come downstairs again.

Suddenly, I heard myself saying, "Before I do anything else I'm going to phone Dr. Saunders and get him right over here. You'll need it, Doris—it will be a steadying influence. His ability to stay calm in an emergency doesn't come from the kind of cold detachment you find in too many doctors."

It was probably true, although I'd said it more to reassure her than from conviction, because I'd only met and talked with Saunders twice. He was a big, gray, tweedy man with kind eyes, and a measured way of talking that inspired confidence. He did seem to possess great calmness, but he'd given me the feeling that it didn't come from a lack of emotional depth.

"I've got to go to dad first," Doris said, and there was a firm determination in her voice that alarmed me. "To go to him"—as if he were still alive and there might still be something she could do to help him. But I didn't think that it meant she doubted what I'd told her. I was sure she knew he was dead, but still felt she should be at his side for a moment before following my advice.

Not that I'd actually given her any, yet. But now I did, tightening my grip on her arm.

"No, you're going straight upstairs," I said, doing my best to make it sound like an order. "He would want you to do that. I'll take care of everything that has to be done until the police get here."

I gestured toward the front door. "I'm going out to the pool and let Helen and Dan know. But first I want you to promise me you'll stay in your room until Saunders arrives. Do you want me to go upstairs with you? Perhaps I should. . . ."

She looked at me steadily for a moment. "That won't be necessary. I'm quite all right. Go out and tell Helen and Dan. You're asking me to do something very difficult. But I've no right to add to a concern I'm deeply grateful for."

"It's a very genuine concern, darling," I told her. "Do you know where Templeton is? And Mrs. Brewster?"

"Henry's out in the garage," she said. "Mrs. Brewster and Anne are probably in the kitchen."

She held herself very straight as she turned and walked toward the central staircase. I waited until her ascending footsteps died away into silence before I crossed to the front door and passed out into the sunlight.

It was very bright, because the sun was almost directly overhead, and there were no trees close enough to the house to cast shadows on the brick-walled terrace and the short flight of stone steps that descended to the lawn and the winding gravel pathway that led to the swimming pool. The pool was clearly visible from the terrace, for it was less than eighty feet from the house and stopped just short of being hidden by the oaks and cedars that formed a solid wall of greenery a little further on.

Helen Shields was standing on the springboard at the northern end of the pool, her slender young body poised for a dive and her husband was watching her from the shallow-water end, shading his eyes against the glare. She was as scantily clad as Doris had been, in a bright blue bikini that caught and held the sunlight in shimmering waves.

Even in that moment of almost unbearable strain Helen Shields' great beauty made me pause for an instant simply to stare.

It wasn't the first time that I'd seen her in the bright stillness of an early summer morning poised with a wood nymph's grace above a shining pool, her image mirrored in the unstirring water and with an ivy-greenness at her back. But it was no more than the third time and the enchantment had undergone no diminishment.

Dan Shields was a fine figure of a man, and there was probably just enough vanity in his nature to make him feel that he'd won her honestly in competition with a large field. But I often found myself wondering if any man would have the right to claim that he had, with a woman whose exceptional loveliness gave her a supreme right to decide, on the basis of no more than a vagrant whim, what kind of husband she preferred.

I thought of calling out to her, to urge her not to dive—just why I could not have said, for what did it matter if she listened to my grim news sitting wet and dripping at the edge of the pool or while standing at the tip of the springboard? Perhaps I feared that the water would get into her ears and deafen her and I would have to shout to make myself heard, and somehow I could not see myself doing that.

You do not announce the coming of death in that way. You announce it in a low, solemn voice, a voice like an echo from the tomb, amidst a tolling of bells. And it is painful to have to repeat what you can barely endure hearing yourself say.

I had no clear recollection of descending from the terrace to the gravel path, only of moving swiftly along it and almost breaking into a run. The gravel crunched under my feet and once or twice the tiny, rocklike fragments, artificially bleached to a snowy whiteness, cut sharply into my soles through the thin leather of my house slippers.

But I continued on without stopping until I saw a much larger flash of whiteness, and Helen Shields vanished from the diving board and the water closed over her with a swirling that spread to where her husband was standing at the opposite end of the pool.

He swung about when he saw me approaching and heaved himself to the circular stone rim of the pool without waiting for his wife to surface.

"Where's Doris?" he called, waving to me. "She said she'd be coming right along. You'd better join us, John. Water's just about right."

I was out of breath when I crossed the rim of the pool, and crouched down at his side. I didn't even try to speak for a moment, just gripped his shoulder and stared out across the pool. There was no need, I felt, to say anything until Helen came into view again. It would take her only a moment to climb the ladder at the deep end, and join us and it would be much better to tell them both at the same time.

How long does it usually take for an accomplished swimmer to dive from a springboard and surface with swift, sure strokes a yard or two away? Like almost everyone else, I wasn't sure, because the underwater swimming factor bulked so large. You could watch divers doing it for years and not be sure, unless you clocked them with a stopwatch. But I wasn't at the race track, and the water at the deep end was very deep and I couldn't see beneath the surface at all—just the swirl which was still in evidence where she'd made the plunge, with the ripples still spreading to our end of the pool. It looked like a tiny maelstrom whitening into foam.

Dan Shields didn't move at all for eight to ten seconds and neither did I. I think we both felt—I know I did—that eight or ten seconds were too long to wait for Helen to break water with one arm outflung in an overhand stroke that would relieve us of all uncertainty. Even if she'd been swimming underwater, quite deep in the pool, it seemed too long.

Fifteen seconds were certainly too long, and when the time continued to lengthen Dan leapt to his feet with a concerned cry, wrenching his shoulder from my clasp so abruptly that it threw me a little off-balance and my palm came down so hard on the stone rim of the pool that a stab of pain lanced through my arm to my elbow.

In another moment we were both on our feet, staring in alarm at the unbroken surface of water that now stretched from end to end of the pool, the swirl of ripples and foam having vanished.

"She's staying down much too long," Dan said. "I don't like it, John."

"Has she done that before?" I asked. "You can swim around underwater for a hell of a long time. She could enjoy doing it, if she doesn't think it would worry you."

"She may have, once or twice. But she knows it would worry me. I'm not going to stand here waiting to find out if it's just a crazy stunt."

Before I could say anything in reply he was running along the rim of the pool toward the deep end. He got to the diving board faster than I would have thought possible, moved swiftly to the end of it, and plunged into the still water in what may have been a more perfect dive than his wife had made. By now I was too alarmed to be sure and nothing seemed of less consequence. So long as he went straight down in search of her with no further loss of time—close to a minute had now gone by—no more could be expected of him and it was what I needed most to help me with my breathing.

The water churned and bubbled for the second time and the ripples spread to where I was standing. Helen's failure to surface kept right on becoming more and more alarming, but for a moment I was spared the need of becoming concerned about Dan as well.

I was pretty sure he'd stay under until his lungs swelled to bursting, for what I'd just told him was true. You can stay submerged for a hell of a long time if you set your mind to it. You don't need a snorkel apparatus to accomplish it and while I could picture Dan coming up for air and diving again and again until he found her I felt somehow that he'd put off doing that as long as possible. It would have been an admission of defeat, in a way—a surrender to despair, if he came up before he absolutely had to.

I had no doubt at all that he would soon reappear. It would have been straining coincidence too much to believe that two underwater accidents could take place in an ordinary swimming pool in less than two or three minutes. The bottom of the pool wasn't covered with broken bottles or jagged rocks or anything in the least dangerous, and anyone who failed to surface couldn't have been the victim of a head-on collision with anything but the bottom itself. And no dive could have carried Helen down that far unless she'd become physically stricken in some way and incapable of rising through water as divers customarily do when a certain depth is reached.

Suddenly, the water burst into foam close to the middle of the pool, and Dan's head and shoulders came into view. I thought for a moment he'd emerged alone, but then I saw that he was supporting Helen with one arm. She was floating on her back so low down in the water that it kept washing over her face and causing her hair to spread out fanwise like a skein of silken thread being unraveled by a fast-spinning loom.

In a moment Dan was swimming with her toward where I was standing and she seemed to be helping him a little by maintaining as much buoyancy as she could by a slight backward and forward movement of her arms.

Her legs did not seem to be moving at all and there was something dark enmeshing them which I couldn't make out until Dan stood up and lifted her into his arms with the water no higher than his waist.

I saw then that both of her legs were bound together by something cordlike and glistening that had wrapped itself around them five or six times. There was a dangling something as well that looked like the upper half of a cane, splintered about seven inches from the head, which seemed as massive as a block of stone.

It was not a block of stone, however. It was the carven head of an animal with pointed ears and a long, wolflike snout. Dan did not stop advancing until he reached the rim of the pool. He lifted Helen higher and set her down almost at my feet, with the water swirling about his knees.

"Hold on to her, John," he said. "She's had a terrible shock. Quickly—take hold of her shoulders. Can't you see? She's starting to sag."

It was true. In another moment she would have toppled back into the pool, and I knelt just in time, supporting her with both arms.

He heaved himself up beside me, and looked at me with grateful eyes. "Thanks, John," he said.

It was the first time I'd ever been thanked for embracing another man's wife. I was pretty sure it would be the last, because it wasn't something I made a habit of.

CHAPTER TWO

There are experiences so shattering you feel nothing at all for a moment—neither the kind of shock that can make you tremble visibly or enable you to relax a little, with a sudden realization that what you feared most hadn't happened.

For close to a minute we remained statue-still at the edge of the pool, frozen into immobility, our equally still reflections in the water foreshortened in a strange way. It was as if, even in that moment of stillness, a physical shrinking was taking place in our bodies—a contraction of our very flesh which couldn't last. In another moment, I felt, we'd be casting a quite different kind of reflection—a shaking, swiftly lengthening one like a coiled spring unwinding.

Helen was the first to come to life again, shattering that marble-still tableau as though some invisible sculptor had grown impatient with his handiwork and decided to demolish it.

"I'm all right," she breathed. "I can sit up without help now. But please get this dreadful thing untangled. What is it?"

She paused an instant, then went on before I could say anything in reply. "It wrapped itself around my legs and tightened. It was horrible. I couldn't shake it off. It looks like an animal-headed cane, with strips of leather dangling from it. A broken cane. But it felt like a writhing snake. I —I was sure it had to be alive."

"It's not alive," I assured her, surprised that I could speak as firmly as I did. "There are canes as sturdy as that. But it has more the look of a ceremonial staff. And if I'm right, there must have been some very primitive magical attributes associated with it in the owner's mind."

"Magical?" Dan was still sitting motionless, staring past me at his wife's entangled legs with a look of stunned incredulity in his eyes. "You picked a strange time to deliver an archeological lecture. Helen nearly drowned. Just get it untangled, can't you? Or shall I try?"

"I'm all right," Helen said again, but looking at her husband this time. "I'll get it off myself. I didn't mean to make such a fuss."

"You might as well toss it right back into the pool," Dan advised. "Templeton is going to drain it tomorrow. He put it off too damned long."

"That would be a crazy thing to do," I said. "Even if it wasn't the kind of evidence we're very lucky to have found."

"What are you talking about?" Dan was staring at me almost accusingly now, his gratefulness of a moment before forgotten. "It's evidence, all right—evidence that in another five minutes Helen would have been beyond help. Is that what you mean?"

It was certainly not a very good time to tell them. And yet, in a way, perhaps it was. It might be best, I told myself, to get it over with while they were still a little numbed by shock.

"That cane or staff or whatever it is was probably used as a bludgeon," I said. "If it was badly splintered breaking it in two and tossing both parts into the pool wouldn't have been an unusual thing for an enraged man to do, if nothing else was left to vent his fury on."

I suddenly found it very hard to go on, knowing what a terrible shock it would be to them, even if I spared them some of the details.

"John is dead," I said. "Someone came in through the study window and struck him a fatal blow on the head. I've no idea who it might have been."

"Oh, my God!" Helen swayed and all the blood drained from her face, leaving it the color of pale clay.

"Doris is all right," I said quickly. "She's taking it very bravely. I wouldn't have left the house otherwise, even for a moment."

"She could still turn hysterical, or collapse," Dan said. "We'd better get right back." His voice was so choked with emotion I had to strain to catch the words.

"I don't think she will," I assured him. "I considered that, but you had to be told. She'll need all the support we can give her until Dr. Saunders gets here. I've phoned him and he should be driving up any minute now."

"Well, let's start back then," Dan said. "Having something like this delay us is one of those damnable things that always seem to happen at the worst possible time. Someone's dying in a hospital, and you fall and break your leg before you can get there. I've seldom known it to fail."

He had gotten to his feet and was staring toward the house. "How long do you think it will take you to get Helen's ankles free? Perhaps I'd better go on ahead of you."

"Not more than a minute or two," I said. "You might as well wait. Unfortunately, water-soaked leather is devilishly hard to untangle. It clings."

Like skeleton fingers damp with earth mold, I thought. But I kept the thought to myself as I bent over and tugged at the leather strips that Helen was now clearly incapable of loosening with her own shaking fingers. She did try to assist me, but I took firm hold of her wrist and shook my head.

"Please, you're making it more difficult," I said. "This isn't as bad as the snarls my fishing tackle sometimes gets into. I'm good at knots."

In a moment I was also getting to my feet, the broken murder weapon tightly in my clasp. As I helped Helen to rise I told myself I'd been a fool to entertain the slightest uncertainty as to what it was. It was not something that went with swimming pools, with the sunlight streaming down through leafy boughs, and a summertime buoyancy in the air. It went with dark, deserted streets in the small hours, or a room in some unguarded house, where a tenant could be brutally slain and the crime remain unsuspected for days. If it had found its way into the swimming pool it could only mean one thing—it had been used as a weapon, and just the fact that Margrave had been sitting in his own spacious, book-lined study, with guests in the house, could not turn it into anything else.

Before returning to the house Helen moved from where I was standing to her husband's side and his arm went quickly around her in support. I had never doubted that he was deeply in love with her, and if he spoke a little impatiently, even harshly to her at times, what long-married couple can hope to totally avoid impatience? I was sure that she was just as much in love with him, and the thought had never once crossed my mind that it might be otherwise. You can usually tell, even when you've had occasion to observe a man and woman in their most unguarded moments for as short a period as a week. And I'd known Dan and Helen for five years.

We remained completely silent during our return to the house, perhaps because so much had happened since we'd left it that we'd exhausted our capacity for communication. Before human speech became fully developed our remote ancestors may have exhausted it in a different way, and been unable to exchange even meaningful glances with their companions after some hideous tribal slaying.

We were just ascending the terrace when a familiar sound came to our ears, causing us to come to an abrupt halt and stare out across the sun-dappled driveway which half-encircled the house and then extended in a straight line through the surrounding countryside for a quarter of a mile, before it vanished around a fork in the road where tall pines clustered thickly.

A small, low-slung foreign car was just coming into view where the pines towered, the sunlight glistening on its golden hood.

Just why Dr. Saunders should have favored so sleek and ostentatious a car had always puzzled me. He was a man of modest means, despite a fairly wide practice, and of distinctly conservative character. But it puzzled me only a little, for I had lived long enough to know that there exists in almost everyone a tendency to step out of character in the choice of a great many things beside cars.

In another moment the car had left the straight road and was turning into the driveway. It made a smooth, purring sound, and came to a halt directly beneath the terrace.

I had never seen anyone shut off the ignition, open the door of the driver's seat, and leap out of a car more quickly—seldom half as quickly. He was as white as Helen had been when I'd told her about Margrave, and seemed to be having just as much difficulty in keeping his shoulders from jerking. He swayed as he climbed the terrace, and the picture I'd always had of him—a big, calm man with level gray eyes and an assured professional manner was abruptly shattered. Not that there was anything abject or cowering about him. He still had the look of a man with too much courage and dignity to relinquish any substantial part of his self-control. But he had the look, also, of a man who was deeply and genuinely frightened.

He nodded at Dan and Helen, and then spoke directly to me without preamble, "What you told me on the phone came as a very great shock. But what I saw just now—my God, I don't think I've ever been so shaken."

"Just now," I said. "Where? Somewhere in the vicinity?"

Since he hadn't even told me what it was he'd seen the question should have seemed premature and preposterous to him.

But somehow it didn't. "About half a mile from here," he said. "At the edge of the road. A man lying dead, with his throat torn out, blood all over him. I drove on, because I could see at a glance he was beyond saving. It wasn't—just his throat. It was his uprolled eyes, the stiffness, the distortion. I'm sure rigor mortis has set in. I've seen it too often to be mistaken."

Dan had taken a slow step forward, and it brought him so near to me that I could hear his suddenly heightened breathing. He was staring at Dr. Saunders with a look of shocked disbelief in his eyes.

"You mean—you didn't even stop to get out and take a close look at him. Why? I don't understand—"

"I stopped the car and took a very close look," Saunders said. "But I didn't get out—no. I drove right on, because I wanted to get to a phone as quickly as possible. Whoever committed a crime as horrible as that must be apprehended without delay, before he kills again. Just the thought that there are a half-dozen cottages between here and where I saw that horror—"

He broke off abruptly and gestured across the terrace. "Just standing here talking about it is insane. I've got to go inside and dial the sheriff's office immediately. It must have been the same man who killed Margrave. You told me on the phone it couldn't have been a more brutal attack, that his skull was crushed, his face horribly disfigured."

"There's no need for you to phone," I said. "I put a call through to Brindley before I phoned you. I was so agitated I guess I forgot to tell you, and you didn't ask me if I'd notified the sheriff."

"I guess I didn't," Saunders said. "It was stupid of me not to have asked. It would have spared me much uncertainty. It was the worst kind of uncertainty, because I kept picturing that murderous madman knocking on the door of a cottage and getting himself admitted."

"Well, the sheriff is coming," I assured him. "You got here first because you had a shorter distance to travel."

"It seemed like a very long distance," Saunders said. "There are depths of human viciousness that carve out a deep, dark hollow in the world—a pit of blackness. It seems to take an eternity to descend into it, if only as a spectator, and return into the sunlight again. And it almost blots out the sunlight for you after you've left it. It will be a long time before I'll be able to put what I saw just now out of my mind."

He'd said "human" viciousness. But there was something I hadn't told him—or Dan and Helen. I was far from sure it was human viciousness that had carved out that black pit—in Margrave's study and on the road where a slain man was lying with his throat torn by something that could tear and rend with no need for the weapon that had been tossed into the pool. Something with—talons? I shut my eyes for an instant, and saw again the mountain cave in Bulgaria where a monstrous shape had towered up before me, blocking my passage.

It had never possessed talons. But there had been times when I most desperately wanted to think that the horror I'd seen was less terrible than what I kept telling myself it almost had to be. A wolf didn't need talons to sink its teeth in a human throat and rip it open, and leave only a dark gleaming from ear to ear.

Just knowing that the sheriff would soon be arriving had clearly lifted a tremendous weight of concern from Saunders's shoulders, enabling him to talk a little more calmly about what he had seen on the road.

"A doctor who can remain entirely unmoved in the presence of violent death, even though he may have had to confront it time and time again, should take up some other profession. Insensitivity can be a deadly thing. It goes with a lack of imagination, and that can be deadly, too."

He shook his head. "Just possibly, however, I might be better off if I didn't have quite so much imagination. Right after I started to drive on I was sure for an instant that something was following the car. It could have been just the trees swaying in the breeze. But I could have sworn it was more than that. Following the car and casting—well, a shadow on the windshield. It looked like a running animal. A big dog with a shaggy head. But if a dog had come dashing out of the woods in pursuit of the car wouldn't it have barked? I rather think it would have barked. And when I looked back I could see nothing."

I found myself wishing he hadn't called it a shadow. There were many stray dogs in the woods and I'd seen one myself just in the past fortnight—a huge, lean, and hungry-looking beast. Such a dog could very easily have come bounding out of the woods to follow the car for a short distance and vanished between the trees a moment before Saunders had turned to look back. Had he seen a pursuing shadow in the rear-view mirror and confused it with a larger, more nebulous one weaving about closer to the car and casting a reflection on the windshield, which he could have seen at the same time? So much depended on exactly what kind of shadow it had been, and what position it had occupied in relation to the speeding car.

But I had no intention of questioning him closely about it, both because I doubted if he knew himself and because I'd phoned him with only one thought in mind—to make sure Doris would have as much support as possible as quickly as possible. Now, unfortunately, another delay had been added to the one that had prevented me from returning quickly to the house from the pool.

I hoped she'd followed my advice and was still upstairs in her room. But if she hadn't she would be in even more need of support.

I turned abruptly and gripped Saunders's arm. "Brindley is sure to bring two or three men with him," I said, "and Doris will have a difficult time of it. With policemen moving about in the house everything will be harder for her to endure. It will help if you talk to her before they arrive."

"Of course," Saunders said, nodding. "Getting to a phone seemed very urgent—more important than anything else. I forgot for a moment how desperately she may need help at a time like this."

"You got here before I thought you would," I said. "So the delay's not important. If you'll just talk to her, be as comforting as you can. . . .

"She likes you very much," I added, after a pause.

Dr. Saunders sighed. "I make a father-image impression, apparently, on women her age. But inwardly I'm not the father-image type. If they only knew how much like a young colt I feel at times—"

"No one conforms to type inwardly," I said. "No one at all. There are no types."

He looked at me keenly for a moment, as if amazed. "You're pretty young to have discovered that," he said. "If it isn't an impertinence—"

"I'm crowding thirty," I told him. "But I suppose I look younger, just as Margrave did."

"I'd say . . . twenty-three. I knew you had to be older, because of the books you've written and all of the traveling you've done. But it certainly hasn't aged you."

"Margrave was much older," I said. "But we could have passed for two college kids batting around the world, picking up little black statuettes and shards of vases dating back three thousand years and setting them down again as if our real interests were centered elsewhere. Not that they haven't been, between delving into the archeological trough. Margrave had a keen eye for a well-turned ankle. I'm more of a one-woman man."

Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken that way about Margrave now. But I felt that it was the kind of compliment that would have pleased him and made him chuckle to himself. And if it hadn't been for Doris I might have been less of a one-woman man.

Dan and Helen had fallen silent, and I was almost sure they had traveled in their thoughts a much shorter distance than half-around the world. Unless I was mistaken —and I didn't think I was—they were still picturing what Saunders had seen when he'd stopped driving—with a grinding of brakes no further from the house than the second turn in the road, which we could have reached by walking in five or six minutes. A half mile, he'd said. It could have been shorter.

I looked up at the sky, wondering how I'd feel if I saw a vulture hovering just above the trees. There might well have been one, if vultures had been native to the locality. The sight would have been a familiar one for me. I've seen vultures of a half-dozen different species—huge, condorlike or quite small in a dozen different parts of the world.

The great Asian vulture, the black-plumaged ones with totally naked heads—from the Andes, the mountains of California, the deserts of Arabia.

Hovering, always hovering, in great circles in the sky, reluctant to descend until they could be sure of their glut. Drawn by the carrion scent and yet taking a long time to be sure, for a living man or woman was of no value to them. Hovering with just one thought in their loathsome little minds—it was good to be a vulture and abominably feast.

Saunders had turned now and was crossing the terrace to the screened front door of a house that I felt needed protection in a new way, from something quite different from hornets and other stinging insects. But there were no new ways of protecting a house and I should have realized that. All had been tried.

Dan and Helen followed him in silence, as if their thoughts were still on other things. I found myself resenting that a little, because all of their concern should have been centered on Doris now.

I was also surprised, in view of the time that had passed, that none of the servants had opened the door of the study and come rushing out of the house to join me at the pool.

Doris had said that Mrs. Brewster, the housekeeper, and Anne, who would have been called an upstairs maid when my parents were quite young, were both in the kitchen and that Templeton had gone to the garage. But even if Doris had stayed in her room, as I'd urged her to do, wouldn't at least one of the three have sensed that something was wrong—just from the stillness alone?

Three servants were unlikely to stay in just one part of a house for very long, and a house of death has a strange way of communicating the fact that it has become quite different from a house filled with laughter and gaiety. I was absolutely certain of that, even though I couldn't have explained it logically.

But it was only when Saunders and Dan and Helen had passed through the screened front door ahead of me that a chill of apprehension took hold of me. Might it not be possible that the servants had suspected nothing because they were no longer capable of suspecting anything? Templeton in the garage and Mrs. Brewster and Anne in the kitchen. What if the women were no longer capable of leaving the kitchen and Templeton of leaving the garage?

Oh, God, no, I thought. *Please God, no.*

But my hand was trembling so violently that I had great difficulty in reopening the door that had swung shut behind me and following Saunders, Dan, and Helen into the house.

CHAPTER THREE

It was more terrible than I had prayed it might be. But Dr. Saunders was mercifully spared the immediate sight of what I saw the instant I entered the kitchen, for he had needed no urging from me to cross the living room as soon as the screen door had swung shut behind him and ascend the stairs to Doris's room. He was halfway up the stairs, with Dan and Helen only a few steps behind him, when I started across the room.

For a moment I had every intention of following them up the stairs. But the apprehension that had come upon me turned suddenly into so great and compulsive a dread that I was drawn in another direction. It was as if two bands of steel, attached by long arms to some invisible magnetic force, had descended on my shoulders and were drawing me toward the back of the living room, and across the narrow hallway and butler's pantry which separated it from the kitchen.

The instant I passed into the kitchen I knew that if Saunders had seen the three bodies that lay stretched out at full length on the floor, between the refrigerator and the door, he would have been incapable of giving Doris any support at all.

I almost stumbled over Templeton, for he was lying within three or four feet of the door, and a goose-necked table lamp just to the right of the stove had been hurled to the floor and the light bulb had been splintered to fragments, leaving only a hanging bulb of low wattage dangling from a long cord on the opposite side of the kitchen.

The housekeeper and Anne lay almost side by side, as if they had been conversing when they had been struck down—in so savage and sudden a way that they had died before they could drag themselves any distance across the floor.

There were dull, dark stains everywhere: on the linoleum which entirely covered the floor, at the base of the stove and sink, and right where I was standing. Templeton's head had a crushed and splintered look, and there wasn't much left of his face. Not even Margrave had looked quite so ghastly in death.

For what must have been a full minute I found it impossible to move. The light was so dim where Mrs. Brewster and the maid were lying that I could not tell exactly how savagely they had been struck down. Both of their faces had seemingly been spared and looked calm and peaceful enough, possessing that cruelly mocking, unnatural look of serenity that is often seen on the faces of the dead. That, more than anything else, convinced me that they had to be dead.

I knew, of course, that I would have to make absolutely sure the instant the first terrible shock wore off a little, and I felt that I could cross the floor without running the risk of having my legs give way and crashing to the floor at Templeton's side. But I postponed it as long as I could, because just the thought of making sure, of kneeling and raising a lifeless hand, and letting it fall back again, then listening for a heartbeat with my head lowered to an unstirring breast, made me feel that there were things no one should be called upon to undertake.

But it was the wrong way to feel when there remained a remote possibility that only Templeton had ceased to draw breath. The dark stains where the two women were lying made it impossible for me to doubt that they had been just as savagely set upon, and beaten to the floor by a bludgeon in merciless hands. But I had no right to take more than that for granted.

I knelt at Anne's side, having seen that only Mrs. Brewster's head had been crushed. A frightful wound had been inflicted at the back of her head, splintering the skull so that it gaped wide open, forcing me to look away quickly. But not only had Anne's face been spared, the only terrible wound was on the left side of her throat. It had not gone quite deep enough to sever her neck, but it was hard to believe that she could have sustained such a wound and remained alive for more than a few minutes.

I was bending over to examine it more closely when she opened her eyes and looked at me.

Her lips moved, but no words came from them for a moment. Then there were words—wild, stricken, with pauses between them.

"It was—it was—not human. I saw—it. It was—some kind of animal. Am I going—to die? Please, please tell me. Am I?"

"No," I lied, not quite knowing how I managed to speak at all. "You're going to be all right, Anne. We'll do something for the pain. We'll stop it."

"No pain," she choked. "I'm not—in pain. Am I going to—"

The words stopped coming. Her head fell to one side, like a wilted fruit on a severed stalk, and a slow glaze overspread her pupils.

She had been a plain-looking girl, but her eyes had been quite beautiful—large, expressive, very much alive, with unfathomable glints in them. Now even that was gone.

A sudden rage overcame me, making me tremble so violently that I had difficulty in getting to my feet. Part of it, I knew, was rage against life itself—its unfairness, its totally inexplicable cruelty. But it was directed as well against the monstrous thing that had entered the house to kill four times and leave another victim lying on the roadside a half mile from the house with his throat torn out.

A monstrous *thing*—not human at all. How could I doubt it now, after what Anne had told me? Some kind of animal, yes. But walking upright like a man, and with a hand that could tighten about a bludgeon and wield it to slay with.

Anne had seemingly caught only the briefest glimpse of it, or she would not have remained in ignorance of how hideously it was shaped. She hadn't even said it was wolflike. Just—some kind of animal.

But having seen it, such merciful ignorance had been stripped from me, like the lamb's wool coat I had sometimes worn to protect me from the cold on mountain slopes where the caves were even more wintry than the winds that howled on the heights outside. I had not been wearing the coat when I had seen it, but an even heavier garment which I had come close to stripping off to enable me to flee more swiftly from the footsteps that had failed to overtake me. That was something I'd always been at a loss to explain, but it did not seem so incomprehensible now.

If there are shapes that can pass at will, back and forth across the chill mysterious borderline which separates the known from the unknown, why should they not sometimes prefer to wait before claiming a chosen victim—or victims? If brutal men, with no compassion in them, can derive pleasure from waiting, solely to enjoy the increasing terror and demoralization which waiting can inflict on a victim, why should a shape as frightful as the one that had pursued me be any different?

I have many defects of character, many weaknesses and faults. So that gives me the right, I've always felt, to take a certain pride in what is perhaps a fairly rare quality—the ability to regain my composure rather quickly after the most terrible of shocks. The man who turned and walked out of the kitchen was a great deal calmer and more self-contained than he had been on entering it. Even though Saunders, Dan, and Helen were still in ignorance of what I'd seen I was sure that when I joined them upstairs, before I said a word, I would find them considerably less calm.

I knew that I might quickly enough find myself trembling again, forced to grip a chair with both hands for support. But for the moment, at least, I had regained my self-control.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dan and Helen were no longer in Doris's room. She was alone with Dr. Saunders, sitting very straight and still in a chair by the window, her dark eyes more luminous than I had ever known them to be.

I instantly assumed that they had gone downstairs to search for me, for my failure to follow them upstairs must have seemed strange to them.

Dr. Saunders confirmed this as soon as I'd closed the door and turned to face him.

"Guests can be a problem at a time like this," he said. "Mr. Shields and his wife are very wrought up. They seemed to feel they *had* to go into the study, despite everything I could do to dissuade them. But they felt they had to get your permission first. I imagine you've had just as bad a time with them."

I shook my head. "I haven't seen them," I said. "I was out in the kitchen. They must be in the study now."

"Yes, I imagine they are," Saunders said, nodding. "Why do people persist in doing foolish things like that, when there's absolutely no need? Doris has been much more sensible."

Doris looked at me, with such grief and torment in her eyes that I feared the self-control I'd prided myself on was about to vanish.

To keep it from vanishing I crossed quickly to where she was sitting, knelt at the side of the chair, and put my arms about her. I held her very tightly, smoothing her hair, wishing that Dr. Saunders was no longer present, so that I could tell her just how much I loved her without sounding like a man who had parted company with his reason.

"Darling," she whispered. "I'm all right now. I haven't let go—and I won't. I followed your advice, didn't I? I haven't stirred from this room. It was very hard, but I knew you were right. If I'd stepped one foot out of the room I'd have gone straight to the study. I couldn't have stopped myself."

For the first time since he'd arrived, Dr. Saunders was smiling. "The support of an elderly physician is probably not totally without value," he said. "It creates an illusion of reassuring paternalism. But it can't compare with what appears to be happening. I can leave now with complete confidence—"

"Don't go, please," Doris said. "I'd be grateful for a dozen different kinds of support right now. I'd like to have all of my close friends around me. There's no substitute for concern and warmth and understanding when you've gone all dead inside. Dad would have wanted me to go on. But you can't if you feel you've no life left in you at all. A little of it has to be restored."

"We'll both stay right here until the sheriff comes," I said. "And if you decide you can't talk to him, I intend to make sure he respects your wishes, both now and tomorrow."

I stood up and nodded at Dr. Saunders. "There are a few things we've got to get settled before Brindley arrives," I said. "So Dr. Saunders and I are going to step out into the hall for just about one minute. I'm not sure we'll see eye to eye, and listening to even the friendliest kind of dispute can be upsetting at a time like this. We've done too much talking as it is."

"Yes, I'm sure we have," Saunders said, taking the cue, and preceding me to the door. "I'm getting more garrulous year by year. It's something I've got to watch."

"Please don't leave on my account," Doris said. "It's foolish. Whatever you have to discuss—"

But Dr. Saunders was through the door before she could finish, and I followed him too quickly for her to realize just how lame my excuse for leaving the room had been.

The instant I'd shut the door firmly behind me Saunders seemed to sense that I had something to tell him that would come as a shock, for he grasped the doorknob and shook it as if to make sure we would not be overheard.

"Doris will have to be told," I said. "But we'll have to talk to her first, for quite a long while. Templeton, Mrs. Brewster, and the maid are dead. I just now went into the kitchen, and found them lying on the floor. Margrave couldn't have been killed more brutally, and they were struck down in the same way. Templeton's head was crushed, Mrs. Brewster—"

I stopped, because the horror in Dr. Saunders's eyes made it impossible for me to go on. I found myself pitying him, wishing I hadn't been compelled to break the news in so sudden and unsparing a way. But what other way had there been? In another moment he would have to return into the room and face Doris again and not look as if I had struck him a savage, totally unexpected blow with my fist. He'd need time to recover, time to get himself in hand, as I had done, and regain his outward composure. Otherwise one look at him would have convinced Doris that we were keeping something from her that might have been beyond her capacity to endure.

Dr. Saunders said nothing for a moment, just stared at me with his lips very tightly compressed. Then a tiny muscle in his jaw began to twitch and he gripped my arm so fiercely that I winced.

"All three of them—God, that makes five in all! It's not so unusual, I know. Paranoid killers sometimes butcher eight or ten. But it always seems unreal, too horrible to accept."

"It's real enough," I said. It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him Anne had lived long enough to confirm what I'd never really doubted—that homicidal maniacs and gray-furred beasts with pointed ears do not slay in quite the same way, even when they have hands to grasp a bludgeon with. There are different kinds of savagery.

But it would be a mistake, I felt, then to even hint at something he could not have brought himself to believe for an instant. His refusal to believe would have remained unshaken even if, clutched in Anne's hand, there had been a clump of torn-away fur as evidence. Perhaps there were some animal hairs, both in the kitchen and in Margrave's study which the sheriff would find when he came with men skilled in the collection of evidence. But I was sure that their disbelief, too, would remain unshaken. They would find some way of explaining it.

There were a half dozen other reasons why it would have been a mistake to dispute what the doctor had said about paranoid killers.

He was still gripping my arm; the shock which had tightened his features in an unnatural grimace had undergone no diminishment. "Do you suppose he killed Margrave and came back again to kill the servants?" he asked. "That's possible, isn't it? He could still be in the house."

"It's just barely possible," I told him. "But in view of what we found in the pool I'm almost sure they were all killed at about the same time, with the same weapon."

"In the pool? I don't understand. What did you find in the pool?"

"An animal-headed cane, or staff, very heavy. You must have seen me holding it when you were talking with us on the terrace. It was badly splintered, and the lower part is probably still in the pool. I set it down on top of the piano before I went into the kitchen. It was one of those crazy things you do sometimes when you're agitated, without thinking. I might have needed it."

"Yes . . . well, I guess I was too agitated to notice it was a broken cane you were holding. I saw that you were holding something, but I hardly gave it a thought."

"It was still dripping wet," I said. "My windbreaker kept blowing in the breeze, and sticking to it. You may not even have caught a glimpse of the head."

"The head of an animal, you said. What kind of animal? Dog-headed canes are common enough."

"It was the head of a wolf," I said. "Or a very savage-looking dog with bared teeth, closely resembling a wolf. Cane heads like that aren't common at all."

"No, I guess they aren't," Saunders said. He was silent for an instant, as if struck by some disturbing thought.

"It seems rather strange that Margrave should have been slain by something like that. It's the kind of weapon a mystery-story writer might well feel couldn't be improved upon—if he were writing about the murder of an archeologist. But it's a safe bet archeologists are no more likely to be murdered by that kind of cane that anyone else—less likely, in fact, because it puts a much greater strain on credulity. A coincidence like that would be the rarest of rare occurrences."

"But it happened," I said. "And just possibly it was more than a coincidence."

"The head of a wolf," he murmured, more, I think, to himself than to me. "Margrave has done considerable delving, I should imagine, into folk tales in every region he's visited in Eastern Europe. And there are few he has left unvisited. Wolf—*werewolf*. How beautiful that would seem to a mystery-story writer with no need to worry about what could have actually prompted a psychotic killer to make use of such a weapon, as Brindley will have to do."

"I told Helen Shields I thought it wasn't a cane, but some kind of ceremonial staff," I said. "And I'm still of that opinion. Brindley may make as much or as little out of that as he wishes. As you say, it's his headache and I don't envy him."

"Well, that doesn't surprise me too much, Saunders said. "It's very easy for a dangerous paranoid to convince himself that he's mastered every dark magical practice he's ever read about. Or am I reading too much into what you mean by a *ceremonial* staff?"

"No, I couldn't have summed it all up nearly as well in just one sentence," I told him. It wasn't true, of course.

But for the second time I found myself regretting I'd said as much as I had.

Suddenly, it seemed unimportant. I hadn't said enough to implant a serious doubt in his mind as to whether or not I agreed with him. If he chose to think that it was a madman who had made use of such a weapon, and not anything associated with what we had been searching for in Bulgaria, then well and good. It was the wrong time, far too premature a time for him to become as tormented as I was. It was almost as if my concern had communicated itself to him, for he abruptly stopped speculating about what a madman might have been capable of, and reminded me that sparing Doris as much as possible took precedence over everything else, seemingly unaware that she had never been absent from my thoughts.

"I'm far from sure it would be wise to tell Doris anything at all for the present," he said. "Tonight perhaps —but not sooner. If you can keep Brindley from seeing her it shouldn't be too difficult for you to persuade her to remain in her room. I'll talk to her, too, of course—try to make her realize that she'll be much better off upstairs than down. When all of the bodies have been removed—"

I couldn't have agreed with him more. Just moving about a house, upstairs *or* down, where the presence of death is still a physical reality can be an ordeal, even when there is just one composed form stretched out in a coffin awaiting burial. And the forms in the kitchen were the opposite of composed. Saunders had released his tight grip on my arm and it was my turn to make what I had to say emphatic in the same way. I not only took him very firmly by the arm, but guided him a little as I turned, until we no longer had our backs to the door. Not that he needed guidance, for he had regained much of his composure, at least outwardly. But I wanted to make sure that he would realize that we must return immediately into the room, having stayed for too long a time in the hall.

"I'll tell her we had to go downstairs for a moment to talk to the Shieldses," I said. "Unless, of course, that doesn't set well with you. They came to the foot of the stairs and called up to us, because they were greatly concerned about her. They could easily have done that, and if you heard a child crying in the night and could console it with an innocent lie you'd be crazy not to do so. She needs Dan and Helen. They're very old friends."

"I know," Saunders said. "But if you want my honest opinion, she needs you most of all. I'd say, at a conservative estimate, you're a hundred times more important to her."

I gave the knob a half turn, opened the door, and passed into the room, letting Saunders precede me, without saying anything in reply.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sheriff Timothy Brindley rang the front doorbell several times, as I might have known he would, since he was a vigorous and somewhat impatient man. But when the sound went echoing through the house it startled me.

If Saunders and I had been numbered among the dead we could hardly have been more silent. For ten minutes we had been sitting very still, exchanging only a few meaningless words, and feeling helpless to keep Doris from surrendering to a quiet kind of grief—far more heart-ending than a continuous sobbing would have been. She was keeping a handkerchief pressed to her eyes, and her chest rose and fell only occasionally, and every time her body sagged a little she made a courageous effort to sit up very straight again. It was as if she wanted us to know that she was trying very hard to avoid adding to our concern.

I got up and moved quickly to her side for perhaps the tenth time since I had come upstairs. I gave her shoulder a firm, reassuring squeeze. "That must be Brindley," I said. "I hope I can get downstairs and let him in before Dan does, because I should like to be the first to talk to him. I may be gone for ten or fifteen minutes. Then I'll come straight back, even if I have to rejoin him for a while later on."

"Yes, go ahead—hurry," Dr. Saunders urged. "He'll bring the house down if he rings that way again."

There was a slight tinge of anger in his voice, as if he felt he had to blame someone for the strain he'd been under.

I couldn't understand why Dan or Helen had failed to go to the door ahead of me, for the ringing *did* begin again, before I reached the foot of the stairs. Possibly what they had seen in the study had left them so shaken that they were still standing motionless, unable to give answering the doorbell the slightest thought.

It seemed a very long time, however, for them to have remained overwhelmed by shock. Another possibility struck me, even more unnerving. What if they had left the study and gone into the kitchen? But surely if they had done that Helen's screams would have gone echoing through the house, just as loudly as Brindley's impatient ringing. Unless—they had only just gone into the kitchen and Helen had crumpled to the floor in a dead faint.

Unnerving as the thought was, it seemed less immediately important than getting to the door as quickly as possible and having someone come into the house with the calm authority of the law to dispel a little of the terrible tension that had been building up inside of me.

The arrival of the police could do that, despite the way everyone feels about the police at times. Any kind of outside authority, untouched by the strain of grappling with something that was dreadful inside, could bring about an easing of tension to some extent. Brindley would be caught up in it, too, quickly enough. But he would start with a more impersonal approach, summoning to his aid the calm detachment which not only officers of the law, but also the members of a dozen other professions, must possess if they are to function effectively at all. I hurried across the living room toward the door.

When Saunders had lept out of his car and ascended the terrace it had seemed incredible to me that anyone could have moved quite so fast. But Brindley came striding into the living room just as quickly and was facing me between the door and the staircase before I could say a word.

To my surprise he'd arrived alone.

"When something like this happens I can usually deputize half the village in fifteen or twenty minutes," he said. "But I was alone in the office when you phoned and decided I could do some phoning of my own just as well after I got here. So I just phoned Dr. Traymore. Since he's only a coroner two or three times a year, I didn't want to catch him in the middle of an operation and have him curse me out the way he sometimes does."

He paused an instant, then said, "Before he arrives and I get on the phone you'd better tell me—well, everything. But it might be better if you kept it in capsule form."

I told him—*everything*. But I couldn't keep it in capsule form, because when I'd phoned him I hadn't known what Saunders was going to encounter on the road and what I would find when I walked into the kitchen after Helen had come close to drowning in the pool.

Brindley was a huge man with the kind of expression on his rough-hewn features you seldom see—I've never known exactly why—on a man of medium build with finely chisled features. He didn't have a sleepy look exactly. But his face had always borne, on the dozen or more times I'd passed him in the village, very much the kind of expression you'd be likely to see on a great, lumbering bear who has just enjoyed a full meal. Such a bear might well be the opposite of unobservant, but would have no particular reason to take a dangerous interest in you, or anyone else in the vicinity.

No particular reason—unless the bear sighted a wounded man and the scent of blood came to its nostrils. It was that way with Brindley as I talked, except that, being an officer of the law, it was criminality that could give him a dangerous aspect.

His eyes narrowed and took on a steely glint and his lips set in so tight a line that they had a sucked-in look. He waited until I fell silent before he said a word, and then it was a question he flung at me. "What does Saunders think about all of this? I'd very much like to know, because he's a man whose opinion I respect."

I had to admire his capacity for self-restraint. I had expected him to be stunned and shocked by what I'd told him, and I guess perhaps he was. But he spoke with matter-of-fact seriousness, as if he had never had any reason to feel that there could be an ocurrence too dreadful for a man like himself to come to terms with, and accept as well, within the range of what human beings were capable of.

"Saunders seems convinced that only a dangerous madman—paranoid schizophrenic was the term he used—could have slain five people in so brutal a way," I said. "A pure paranoid type or a manic-depressive would be far less likely to. But I imagine he'd agree that the precise terminology isn't too important—just the fact that it was too fiendish a crime for a sane man to commit."

"And how about you?" Brindley asked. "Do you agree with Saunders?"

"He's justified, I suppose, in believing that," I said evasively.

"Not quite, I'm afraid," Brindley said. "It's something you naturally think of straight off. But a mass murderer—whether he kills five people or twenty or half a million—doesn't have to be psychotic. As often as not he's completely sane, both in a legal sense and otherwise. He can commit a series of brutal crimes with some quite definite, entirely logical purpose in mind."

"To throw suspicion on someone else, you mean? To create a scapegoat."

"That's just one of possibly a dozen motivating factors that wouldn't have to be in the least psychotic," Brindley said. Just the fact that he disagreed with Saunders brought me no reassurance. Two opinions can be as far from the truth as one, even when they are contradictory. I was just as fearful of instilling the slightest doubt in his mind as I had been with Saunders, despite the fact that I desperately wanted to give him some hint, some carefully veiled warning, that would keep him alert and on guard. But how could I hope to overcome the ingrained skepticism of a hard-headed county sheriff who had probably never in his life questioned the naturalness of every lengthening shadow he had encountered in a house of death?

If I had told him that an object did not need to be clearly visible or solid or three-dimensional to cast a shadow more terrifying in shape than a crouching madman or a sane killer with a madman's cunning, I was sure he'd have looked at me in a very strange way.

I was rescued from the deep well of darkness down which I was just starting to fall again, having seen for an instant a slight flickering that could have been a shadow, when Brindley's still matter-of-fact voice made me realize that no such well had opened at my feet. It was not physical at all, but only in my mind, at least for the moment. Nothing in the living room had changed and there was nothing in Brindley's expression to indicate that his mind had strayed from what he had just been saying.

"It's not so easy to decide what it's best to do first when you haven't the time to stand still for a minute and think about it," he told me, with a tinge of police-officer frustration in his voice. "But before I get on the phone you'd better come with me to the study and then I'll take a look at what you say you found in the kitchen. I'd like to get that taken care of before Dr. Traymore starts taking out his instruments. He's bound to make some changes in the position of the bodies. It never does any good to caution him—"

He could have wanted to go to the study first because it was Margrave's death which he'd come to investigate and nothing had diminished its importance, even now. If Margrave had not been killed it must have seemed as likely to him as it did to me that no one else in the house or on the road would have suffered the same fate.

It was a natural way to feel, even though it didn't make too much sense when you analyzed it. Margrave could have been just one of five victims chosen at random. But even though I knew something that Brindley didn't, just the fact that it was Margrave's house and he was a scholar of some renown gave him more importance as a key factor somehow. In the eyes of a police officer it could hardly have seemed otherwise.

But I had enough empathy to realize that Brindley probably wanted to go to the study first for another reason as well. It would spare him the shock of seeing the worst horror too abruptly, give him time to steel himself a little more in advance.

I would have felt the same way if I had been in Brindley's shoes, and it was a relief to know that I wasn't so wrapped up in myself that I couldn't sympathize with him. He would be seeing the horror for the first time and if the house had been glass-walled, and I had seen all four victims instead of just one when I'd entered the study, I don't know what the shock would have done to me. It was something I didn't care to dwell on.

He was silent as we threaded the two long, right-angled hallways which separated the study from the living room, clearly in too grim a mood to say anything more for a moment.

I was silent, too, but for a different reason, though my mood was grim enough. I was suddenly remembering how strange it was that neither Dan nor Helen had come into the living room for ten full minutes after their failure to answer the doorbell had greatly puzzled me. I had been talking to Brindley for at least that long, and it seemed incredible to me that they had remained out of sight for close to half an hour, no matter where they had gone.

Could they have left the house, I wondered, and gone out on the terrace or returned to the swimming pool? It was barely possible, and I was about to ask Brindley if he'd seen them outside when an increase in his stride brought him so close to the study door that the question seemed a needless one. I would know in a moment and if they were not in the study—

They were in the study, Dan by the window and Helen slumped back against the bookcase-lined wall on the adjacent side of the room, as I saw the instant Brindley reached out and flung the door wide.

CHAPTER SIX

For an instant I saw almost all of the room from the hallway. Then Brindley's huge frame hid the window from view, for he'd shifted his position a little after taking two or three swift steps forward. But I could still see Helen from where I'd halted, too shaken by a sudden, violent trembling to follow him immediately into the room.

At first I thought that she was dead. There was no color at all in her cheeks, and her arms hung inertly at her side and were bent at the wrists in an oddly twisted way, as if the ebbing away of her life had left them very limp and pliable.

But then, all at once, her shoulders began to twitch and she raised herself by bringing both of her palms flat against the floor. Her eyes stared wildly about the room, giving her the look of a woman just awakening from some frightful dream.

She remained slumped back against the wall, but in a less sagging position, and began to scream. In another moment Brindley was kneeling at her side, supporting her with one arm and whispering something to her which made her stop screaming and make a more determined attempt to rise. This time, with Brindley's aid, she succeeded, and was on her feet when I found myself inside the room with only a confused awareness of having moved at all.

The sunlight was very bright in the room now, and I had passed so quickly from the dim light of the hallway into the bright glare where Dan lay sprawled that his face was just a weaving blur for a moment.

But I didn't have to see his face to know that he was moving about on the floor very much as Helen had done in a less prone position, making an attempt to raise himself that was only half-succeeding. His shoulders rose and then fell back again, and he kept turning from his back to his side as his arms failed to support him.

Suddenly, my eyes became adjusted to the glare and I saw his face clearly. His features seemed all wrenched apart. But his eyes were wide open and he was staring straight at me.

"I can't seem to get up, John," he groaned. "Just shock, I guess—weakness. It will pass, but right now I need your help."

I bent over and took firm hold of his shoulders, then realized the easiest way of helping a sprawled-out, half-dazed man to his feet was by gripping him beneath the armpits. He staggered twice, carrying me forward with him and we might have both gone crashing to the floor if I hadn't managed somehow to regain my balance in time.

It took both Dan and Helen a full minute to do more than lean back against the book-lined shelves and stare at us, their breathing coming in choking gasps. Brindley said nothing, just waited, with as deep a concern in his eyes as I have ever seen in the eyes of a police officer.

Dan was the first to speak in what seemed to cost him so painful an effort that I had the impulse to tell him to take his time, that two or three minutes longer of silence was of no consequence.

"I can't answer for Helen," he breathed, darting a quick glance at his wife. "But I—I don't think the ghastly thing actually struck me. It just came sweeping toward me across the room, right after we'd turned and were walking toward the door. But I felt myself being lifted up and hurled backward, by something that came from it, a kind of force. Like an electric charge but different—both jolting and—well, smothering."

"Yes, that's it," Helen managed. "It was like that. I don't think it struck me either. But it was as if a blanket had wrapped itself around me with long needles projecting from it charged with electricity. The pain was excruciating for an instant. Then I guess I must have blacked out."

"There was a smell of burning," Dan added, nodding. "A distinct smell of something burning in the room, catching fire suddenly very close to us."

"But the thing itself," Brindley said, reaching out and gripping him by the arm. "Did you see it? For God's sake, don't talk around it that way. *Did you see what it looked like?*"

"You'd talk around it, too, if you'd caught just one quick glimpse of it," Dan flung back at him. "It was like a bat—gigantic, with pointed ears. Flying right in through the window in the bright sunlight. But the instant it was inside the study, about three feet past Margrave, it seemed to turn from black to gray. There was blood on it—not dried like the blood on the chair and Margrave's head, but bright, gleaming. It would have been a crazy thing to do. But if it hadn't come straight at me I think I would have thrown my arm across my face, just to shut out the sight of it."

Brindley looked at me. He didn't shake his head, as I'd feared he might do, but I knew what was passing through his mind. Probably, I had no right to blame him, under the circumstances, for refusing to believe a single word of what Dan had just said.

It didn't matter too much, except that it drew the problem I'd been facing since he'd entered the house more to a head, since I believed that Dan had only been mistaken about one thing. A wolf's head isn't exactly batlike.

It was all too completely in the open now for me to worry too much about instilling a faint doubt in Brindley's mind. If Dan hadn't instilled it in full measure there was no possibility that I could succeed in doing so. It enabled me, at least, to be more reckless about what I said.

If I seemed to take what Dan had said quite seriously the most Brindley could accuse me of now would be gullibility. And that was quite different from having him look at me as if I'd parted company with my sanity.

"You said it looked like a bat—or reminded you of a bat—flying in through the window," I said, nodding understandingly and keeping my voice level, trying not to give Dan the idea that I might have doubted his veracity. "Could it have—resembled more the wolf head on the cane we found at the pool?"

"Yes, it didn't look like a bat to me," Helen said, before her husband could say anything in reply. "It all happened so quickly I can't be sure. I was slower than Dan in turning when we heard the rustling, and probably caught an even briefer glimpse of it. It looked very much like the head of a huge gray beast with bared teeth. I don't know why, but I just didn't give a thought to the cane."

"You heard a rustling first?" I asked.

"That's right, we both did," Dan said.

"Did you see a shadow? Did a thick, black shadow form in the room a moment or two before? Anywhere in the room?

"Isn't it just barely possible," I went on quickly, without giving him a chance to reply, "that what you thought was a gigantic black bat coming in through the window was a shadow inside the room? The sunlight is very bright. You could have been deceived by the glare."

"There *was* a kind of darkening right by the window a minute or two before we started toward the door," Helen said. She was looking at where Margrave was still sitting, silent and still in death, and I felt a pang of guilt for having forced her to gaze in that direction. But it was only for an instant, for she looked away quickly. It was something I'd found much harder to do.

"I noticed the darkening, too," Dan said. "But I didn't pay much attention to it. The sunlight stayed just about as bright elsewhere. What are you getting at, John? How could a shadow change what we saw?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Brindley said, his voice harsh with impatience. "There's nothing I can think of that could change what you saw—if you actually saw it. But if it was just something you *thought* you saw—"

"We both saw it and were were attacked by it," Dan said. "I know what you're thinking. You'd like to believe that seeing Margrave . . . the way he is . . . was so great a shock that we imagined the whole thing. I might have—it's a remote possibility—and Helen. Either of us, but *never* both of us. You'll never get me to believe otherwise."

It was what I liked most about Dan. No kind of authority could intimidate him when he felt that he was in the right.

"At a time like this it would be a great mistake to make an issue of it," Brindley said. "It makes a difference, when you're dealing with an attack, whether the victims are alive or dead. If they are alive, and there are others lying dead you haven't gotten around to yet, you put first things first. I've a great many phone calls to make—"

"Just what do you mean by that?" Dan demanded. "Saunders only saw one man lying dead?"

"There are five now," I told him. "Templeton, Mrs. Brewster, and Anne were attacked and slain in the kitchen. We can't be sure about the time. But it was probably right after, or right before, Margrave was killed."

"Oh, no!" Helen's lips went white again and she clung to Dan's arm for support. He swayed a little, but said nothing, just looked from me to Brindley and back again as if there had been a slight doubt in his mind as to whether it would have been possible for us to have kept such knowledge to ourselves as long as we had, if there hadn't been something in connection with it we were fearful of letting him know about.

To reassure him I said, "Terrible as it is, we've got to remember—and keep remembering—how much worse it might have been. Doris was spared. So were you and Helen."

They certainly hadn't been spared entirely. But I knew Dan too well to feel he'd misunderstand what I had said, and think I was agreeing with Brindley.

I couldn't seem to keep myself from looking toward the window again and it was then that I saw it—for the first time. There was something on the floor close to the chair where Margrave's body had stiffened in death, and then grown limp again, that didn't look like a bloodstain. It was on the small scatter rug about two feet from the chair and not on the bare floor where there were many dark stains, some of them resembling ink blots. Blood can spread and assume claw-shaped patterns before coagulating, but the stain I saw didn't look like a claw. It looked like a very small human footprint, so sharply defined that it stood out even from half across the room.

For an instant the wild thought flashed across my mind that if a child had come into the room through the window before the blood had dried and crossed to the scatter rug the blood on its shoes might have left just such a print on the rug.

Not caring in the least what Brindley might think, I crossed to the window and knelt between the rug and the chair. I reached out and drew the edge of the rug closer, and stared down intently at what, I could now see, was *unmistakably* a small human footprint.

But it was not outlined in blood. It had been seared into the rug, leaving it slightly charred. I touched it with my finger and looked at the tip. There was a tiny smudge of smoke-blackened ash clinging to it. I thought I could detect a slight odor of burning, such as even the smallest of quickly extinguished fires leaves in its wake when there has been a singeing of wool or cotton fibers.

And, suddenly, I remembered what Dan had said—his exact words: "There was a distinct smell of something burning in the room, catching fire suddenly very close to us."

I got up abruptly and returned to where Brindley and the Shieldses were standing. I was surprised that none of them had moved, particularly Brindley. I had expected him to be at my side a moment after I'd crossed to the rug without his permission.

"We haven't time to make any detailed examinations," he said, his impatience verging on anger. "I just wanted to make sure I'd remember how the study looks now, in a general way, before Traymore gets here. I thought I made that plain."

"Yes, very plain," I said. "All right, I'll take you to the kitchen."

I was tempted to add, "If you find a blood-soaked strip of fur lying on the floor and don't bother to pick it up until you're through phoning I hope you won't blame me if it's gone, when it could have been so easy to take just a little more interest in it."

The barb would have been directed at the "don't touch" psychology of police officers in general, which I'd always resented, perhaps unjustifiably. Quite possibly I had sharper eyes than Brindley and it hadn't even occurred to him that it had been a footprint I'd crossed the room to examine. There's a great difference in human vision. It was even possible he was a little near-sighted and should have been wearing glasses.

But it would have been the wrong time to say anything more than I had in the presence of Dan and Helen. For a terrifying instant they had seen what I had seen earlier, and it had moved just far enough across the borderline of the unknown to attack them physically. If I'd said just one word more I could never have forgiven myself, because about the cruelest thing you can do is to heighten the dread of a man or woman who has stood for a moment on the cold, gray shores beyond space and time. At such moments the shapes of nightmare are far from illusionary and can take on form and substance so swiftly that you have no time left to remember the immediate past. You lose your identity, become just a traveler without a name, a vague somebody with no actual knowledge of how you could have arrived at a destination so hideous and unnatural. You feel all hollow inside, drained, empty, disembodied. But you still know that you are at the mercy of claws that can tear and rend, and teeth that can sink deep into your flesh and tear out your throat. And when the agony begins there will be no way of stopping it.

I didn't want Dan and Helen to accompany us to the kitchen and was relieved when Brindley said, "I'll want to question you both at considerable length later on. But Dr. Saunders and Miss Margrave are staying upstairs, and that's where I think it would be best for everyone to remain for the next hour or so. In just about half an hour this house will become as crowded as the railroad station on weekday mornings. And if you stayed downstairs it would seriously hamper what will have to be done."

Dan started to protest and then appeared to think better of it. "It makes sense, I guess," he said. "I wouldn't have let my wife go into the kitchen anyway. And I'd just as soon be spared the sight of what's there."

"So would I," Brindley said, "if I had a choice."

He tapped me on the shoulder. "Come on," he urged. "We may as well get it over with."

CHAPTER SEVEN

The earth could probably be shattered and destroyed in an hour or two. The universe would take a great deal longer to suffer the same fate, but perhaps not quite as long as its size has led the astronomers to believe.

Of one thing I was sure. A house could vanish in a split second of time if a bomb were dropped on it.

I didn't actually expect anything like that to happen before the house became quiet again, with just one deputy sheriff left to stand guard downstairs. But the feeling was there, at the back of my mind, and I couldn't seem to throw it off.

Dr. Saunders had left a few minutes before any of the others—and there had been twelve others—and Brindley had been the last to leave.

The Shieldses were alone in their room and Doris was alone in hers when I went upstairs for the tenth or twelfth time and knocked lightly on the door.

"It's me—John," I called out, when there was no sound of footsteps approaching the door from inside the room.

For a moment the silence continued and a chill of fear made me grip the doorknob so tightly that it bruised my palm. But before I could turn it the inner knob made it move in my hand and the door swung open and Doris stood facing me, looking no different than she had a few minutes before—the last time I'd left her to go back downstairs.

I moved past her into the room and shut the door very firmly behind me before I turned to look at her again. She was bearing up better than I had dared to hope. She would remain, I knew, almost inconsolable for a very long time. The loss of a parent, like the loss of a husband or a wife, can remain for months a daily burden of grief that can make everything else seem of very little consequence. Not with everyone, perhaps, but I feared it might be that way with Doris.

She had very deep emotions. So had I, although I could be very successful at pretending otherwise at times. She knew about the servants now, and just before Brindley had left I had felt that it would not be too much of a strain if he asked her a few questions. It was better to get it over with, I'd felt. There would be so many ordeals awaiting her in the days ahead that I had felt it might be wise to blunt the edge of his need to know more than he did as soon as possible.

I could see that he hadn't been satisfied with what she'd been able to tell him. But that was just as true of what he'd gotten out of me, the Shieldses, and Dr. Saunders. I had taken it for granted that I had been the only one who hadn't told him everything I knew, and that made what she said to me now come as a shock.

"John, there's something I promised dad I wouldn't say a word to you about. But I think he'd want you to know now. Two days ago he had a visitor."

There was nothing particularly startling about the statement itself, but I could tell just by the look in her eyes that it was something she hadn't told Brindley about, either.

"Just a minute, darling," I said.

Right at that moment the windowpanes had rattled and, as you'll sometimes do when you feel that you need a moment to collect your thoughts, I crossed to the window and looked out. There could be no doubt that a storm was in the making. The sky had become heavily overcast, and the shrubbery at the edge of the lawn was in violent motion.

I almost found myself wishing that the wind would increase, the sky grow even darker, and we'd be granted the privacy and seclusion of a gale-buffeted house for a while.

I had never feared that kind of seclusion and moaning or howling winds had never seemed ominous to me.

It was a strange way to feel, perhaps—certainly quite different from the dire foreboding which came upon most people when they were confined indoors in an isolated house in the country in the wake of frightening events. But if it was the unknown you had reason to fear, why should the ordinary manifestation of nature be in any way terrifying, apart from the physical damage which a violent storm could inflict? Should natural occurrences, no matter how violent, not be thought of in a quite different way—as serving to remind us *how infrequently* chill winds from the unknown did violence to nature by blowing cold upon us?

What was more to be feared was a day of exceptional stillness with the sunlight shining brightly, as it had done all morning, and a kind of barely perceptible stirring of the leaves on trees that towered in shadows in the total absence of a breeze. It was only when nature seemed almost, but not quite, to have stopped breathing that you had most to fear from the unknown—even though it often manifested itself under quite different circumstances. Or so I had always believed. I suddenly remembered that there had been a breeze, a quite considerable one, blowing all morning, but that meant very little by itself. In general it had been the kind of day when encroachments on nature's usual inviolability were more likely to occur than during periods of storm and shipwreck, if you chanced to be at sea, or in the course of a raging hurricane on land when trees were torn up by the roots and the sky was shrouded in darkness.

Just the violence alone could bring a measure of reassurance, to my mind at least, for it was as if nature were summoning all of her strength to erect a barrier against a more frightful kind of violence.

Never for a moment, after the first shock had diminished somewhat, had I doubted that what I had seen was linked to what I had previously seen at the mouth of a cave in Eastern Europe. The instant the shadow had formed, I had known and I had been sure.

There had been moments since then when doubts had assailed me, but only superfically. Deep in my mind that conviction had remained unshaken. When a horror too great for the conscious mind to endure continuously persists in struggling back into awareness, the conscious mind also erects a barrier, just as nature appears to do when the sky clouds over and a great wind arises.

Right at that moment I would have welcomed a storm for another reason. It would have drawn Doris closer to me, would have shielded us from the human encroachments that were less likely to occur when a house is storm-isolated. We had just endured too much of that—of harshly unsympathetic strangers moving in and out through the rooms downstairs and occasionally talking in so loud a voice that Doris could hardly have failed to overhear a little of what they had been saying.

I turned from the window and walked back to where Doris was sitting. I sat down on the arm of the chair and put my arm around her and drew her close to me.

"Tell me about the visitor," I said. "Where was I when he called and what excuse did he give for wanting to talk to your father? I can't understand why you didn't tell me about this before. Or why he didn't say a word about it. I should think he would have discussed it with me immediately."

"You know how dad was," she said. "When something greatly disturbed and worried him he usually preferred to keep it to himself. He didn't like to worry anyone close to him unnecessarily. I doubt if he would have told me if I hadn't seen and talked with the man. I mean—about how ugly it could have been. They came close to exchanging blows and if the man hadn't left right after that I think dad would have forced him to leave by threatening to send for the sheriff."

"And where was I at the time?" I asked.

"In the village. You'd just broken your favorite pipe, remember? And you seemed very happy about it. You told me it gave you an excuse to buy a quite expensive new one you'd had your eye on for some time."

Despite the grimness of my mood I couldn't keep myself from smiling and drawing her even closer.

"I might have known *you'd* remember something like that," I said. "Buying the pipe didn't give me one-tenth as much pleasure as having you remember how little-boyish I can be at times. It's important to feel you'll be understood by someone who is going to share all of your future small pleasures until the stars fall out of the sky."

"You may have more difficulty in becoming reconciled to some of mine," she said. "They may not always be small ones, because I'm afraid I was brought up to be extravagant. But we shouldn't be talking about that now, should we? I don't know why I mentioned it, exactly."

"I do," I told her. "You were brought up to be extravagant because you were deeply loved. Your father knew you couldn't get too much of it, at any time, in any place. It doesn't have to come through extravagance—a thousand other things can create it—but it's always needed, because there will be times when we'll be completely without it."

"Like now, you mean?"

"Not quite," I said. "We're together, with the rest of the world shut out, and to me that's happiness, no matter how much it may be shot through with grief and torment."

"I wish I could feel that the rest of the world was shut out," she said. "But how can we feel that way, John, after what has happened? This house—just the house alone—is part of the world, isn't it? And I'm sure it hates me. It's as if the walls were alive and spying on us, filled with rage because we've been able to stay alive. I don't feel alone for a minute, and I don't think you do. What's happening to me, John—why do I feel that way? I really do and I know it's crazy and it makes me want to scream. Does it mean I'm losing my mind?"

"You don't actually believe anything of the sort," I said. "Come now, admit it. What you're experiencing is just what you said it was—a feeling, nothing more. There's no more common experience, if more than one tragedy has occurred in a very short time in a place as familiar to you as the lines on your palm. You've never had any reason to experience dread before, and you can't believe that friendly surroundings could suddenly turn hostile and menacing unless they had also undergone a change. You begin to feel that brutal violence must be contagious, that it can spread from a human mind to the inanimate. 'The very stones would cry murder!' But what Shakespeare forgot to mention was how stones—or a house—can sometimes make you *feel* that they have also turned malignant, and do not cry murder at all. Why should they shout an accusation when the same dark evil has spread to them?"

She said nothing for a moment. Then she gripped my hand very tightly, her fingers entwining themselves with mine. "I'm not afraid for myself," she said. "As I told you when Dr. Saunders came, I feel all empty inside, and I'm not sure I want to go on living. But I'm afraid for you. Do you think it might be better if I stopped trying to hold myself in this way? If I just broke down and cried?"

"No, I don't think it would be better," I said. "I think it will help if you stop giving that so much as a thought. One way to start is by trying to remember every detail of something that you may not particularly want to recall. Anything that requires an effort, that forces you to concentrate on just one thing at a time, is almost certain to help."

I paused for an instant, listening to the wind rising outside, rattling the windowpanes continuously now. "The man who called," I said. "You haven't even told me what he looked like."

"He had a slightly Oriental look," she said. "He was small in stature, with a quite dark complexion, and there was something disturbing about the way he kept staring at me the instant I opened the front door and he walked into the living room.

"He just stood there, not saying a word, just looking straight at me until I asked him exactly what he wanted to see dad about. Oh, I forgot. He did tell me that he had met dad two years ago—he mentioned a town in Bulgaria—and there was something he wanted to discuss with him. If he hadn't, I wouldn't have let him in. But that was before he walked into the living room and stared at me so hard I became a little frightened and regretted I hadn't called dad before taking the chain off the door."

"You had good reason to be frightened," I said. "It wasn't a very wise thing to do."

"I often do unwise things," Doris said. "Thoughtless things as well—unkind things. Dad hated to have me go around the house in a bikini, but I hardly gave it a thought."

"When I left the house that afternoon you weren't wearing one," I said.

She nodded. "I know. And I didn't change to one. That wasn't why he was staring at me. I told myself it could have been because he was amazed that a man as young-looking as dad could have had a grown daughter. But I'm sure that wasn't the reason either, because I hadn't told him who I was."

She shook her head, a troubled look in her eyes, as if the visitor's staring still puzzled and disturbed her.

"He seemed to be looking right through me—at the big oil painting at the right of the staircase perhaps," she said. "It was as if my head had become transparent. And the painting did seem to interest him, because when I insisted on knowing exactly what he wanted to talk to dad about he said it was about a cave they had explored together two years ago. And there's a cave in that painting, even if it's by Watteau and dates back to the eighteenth century, and there's a wood nymph and a satyr in it. It's a huge, dark, dismal-looking cave, just like some of the ones you and dad explored in Eastern Europe."

"Well, that could have been just a coincidence," I said. "And in Europe men stare at beautiful women more brazenly than they do here. In Italy women feel insulted if they are not stared at."

"I don't doubt it," Doris said, "but you don't know how it made me feel. As if—but I'm probably attaching too much importance to it. It's what happened when he went into the study and talked to dad that's important."

"Just a moment, darling, before you go on," I said.

"How was he dressed? If he was wearing a turban and a flowing robe I'm sure you'd have said so straight off. But I still would like to know."

"He was wearing an ordinary business suit," she said. "Light gray, well tailored, no hat. His hair was cut quite short. Not exactly a crew cut, but short. He looked very neat and presentable."

"Formal, in other words," I said. "Like an Eastern European diplomat? A United Nations type?"

"You could say so, I guess."

"Quite different from the way I go around most of the time," I said. "Windbreaker, corduroy trousers, as likely as not a big hole in one of my socks."

I was persistent, because it somehow seemed important to get a clear picture of him in my mind.

"He presented a very great contrast to you, if that's what you mean," Doris said. "In looks as well. I've told you how he looked."

"You said slightly Oriental. Do you mean he looked Chinese?"

"Not really—not in the least, in fact. He just looked a little on the rather darkish, Oriental side."

"That means he could have come from practically anywhere in Eastern Europe or the Middle East," I said. "It wouldn't rule out Bulgaria or even Western Europe, Italy, southern France. There are certain characters you can't easily fit into a pattern that would make sense. You've spared me the need of trying."

"You mean—you expected that someone from one of the regions you and dad explored might decide to pay him a visit?"

I shook my head, knowing it was a *human* someone she had in mind. "World travelers who go digging into ruins and display too much curiosity about native superstitions are bound to make a few enemies," I said. "But seldom the kind who will cross an ocean on a mission of retribution. But if, as you say, he identified himself and right after that they had a violent quarrel—"

"He could have struck dad and it wouldn't have seemed as violent as some of the things he said. Horrible, malicious threats. He said the house would burn to the ground. He said we'd all be trapped upstairs and unable to get out, because the ground floor would become a sea of flame."

"You'd better tell me exactly what happened after you left them alone in the study," I said. "No—wait. This is important. How did your father look when he first caught sight of the man?"

"I left him standing in the hallway and went in and told dad about him first," Doris said. "It was a relief to know that if I'd made a mistake in letting him come into the house dad would turn it into a very small one. I was sure he'd know exactly how to deal with an unwelcome visitor. From the way dad looked I think it came as a shock to him. But he said it was all right—he'd have a brief talk with Mr. Ruschna."

"Ruschna. The name's vaguely familiar," I said. "I may have heard your father or someone else mention it. But I doubt if it was the name of anyone I talked to. It's Bulgarian, I think. We explored so many caves and stopped at so many inns I could have exchanged a few words with him and completely forgotten what he looked like. But I don't think so. I've a very retentive memory for both names and faces."

"Dad looked just about as grim as I'd ever known him to look," Doris went on slowly, as if weighing each word with care. "He gestured me back into the hall and shut the door before they started talking. But as I told you, I caught a few words, because dad's voice kept rising in anger. Then he threw the door open and Mr. Ruschna came stumbling out. Dad may or may not have given him a shove. I think he did, because there's a difference between ordinary anger and resentment, and a certain, very terrible kind of rage. His face turned much darker than it had been, then got white about the lips. It gave him—well, a jungle-mask look.

"He turned around and said some horrible things, which I wish I didn't have to repeat."

"You just did," I reminded her. "You said he threatened to burn the house down."

"No, only that it would burn to the ground. He didn't threaten to set fire to it himself. But that wasn't as horrible as some of the other things he predicted would happen to dad, and to me, I guess. He kept looking at me, too. He said we'd see *it* before we died in screaming agony, right through the smoke and flames. He said it would come straight toward us, but that we'd be dead before it could attack us. But it would drag us downstairs and outdoors, and when we ceased to be flaming torches it would feast on our scorched flesh. He didn't explain what he meant by 'it.' "

"Only a half-demented man would say such things," I told her. But my mouth felt suddenly parched and I had to pause a moment before I could go on without letting her suspect how difficult it had been for me to speak at all.

"Just the thought of being burned alive is the awful part," I said. "What would happen afterward wouldn't matter to you at all. Anyone who would go on piling horror on horror that way with no actual need to do so would almost have to be unbalanced."

"He didn't act unbalanced," Doris said. "And if he had been lacking in intelligence, I am very sure that dad wouldn't have taken what he said so seriously that he stood in the doorway looking as though he'd just been told that he had only a few hours to live."

"A man can talk in a calm, assured way and make a reasonable request or two and be a certifiable lunatic," I said. "You ought to know that. Did he say anything more?"

Doris nodded. "He accused dad of taking something that belonged to him. He didn't use the word 'stealing,' but I'm sure that's what he meant. I can remember exactly what he said: 'you damned archeological ghoul. Do you know just what you've done—have you ever given it a serious thought? It means nothing to you. But without it my life is no longer my own. You've got to give it back, do you hear? If you don't, I'd rather be buried deep in the earth, rotting in every limb, than face what is in store for you. And your daughter will not be spared.' "

"And what did your father say to that?" I heard myself asking.

He said he couldn't give it back, because he'd lost it. He said it was in the last shipment—or should have been—but somehow it had gotten lost. When he'd unpacked the crate he could find no trace of it."

"Did he say what it was?"

Doris shook her head again. "Neither of them said exactly what it was. But I got the impression it was some kind of small artifact dad had dug up. A tiny stone figurine, perhaps, like the one on the mantel in your room—or an amulet, or something of the sort.

"Dad wouldn't tell me when I asked him, after he let Mr. Ruschna know he'd send for the sheriff if he didn't get out of the house. He said that just to talk about it could bring bad luck, that he had no intention of exposing me to even the remote possibility of that. And he told me not to tell you, but for a different reason. He said you'd probably remember meeting and talking to Mr. Ruschna, and would know what a malicious person he was. He didn't want to worry you."

"Did he say where I'd met him—or when?"

"No. He wouldn't tell me that either. He said it wasn't of great importance, that he'd let himself take the man's wild threats too seriously for a moment and was heartily ashamed of having done so.

"What struck me as most strange," she added, after a pause, "was what he said about the possibility that just discussing it might bring us both bad luck. I've never known anyone less superstitious than dad. He'd walk under a ladder without the slightest misgivings, put his hat on the bed if he was a guest in another house, and if he broke a mirror he wouldn't give it a second thought, unless, of course, the glass flew up and cut him or it was a valuable antique."

"So he practically threw Mr. Ruschna out of the house," I said. "You don't always have to do that physically if you're strong-willed enough."

"Well, he just turned around and went back to the living room and a moment later we heard the front door slam. I guess you could say dad triumphed through the strength of his will, although he was terribly shaken. He tried very hard not to let me know what a shock it had been to him. But I could tell—I knew."

"When I returned from the village he seemed calm enough," I said.

"Dad could always look perfectly composed and at ease when he set his mind to it," Doris said. "There were few things he couldn't do, when he wanted to spare someone else pain or anxiety—or just simple embarrassment."

For a moment her voice become slightly choked and I was sure that if I'd looked at her face closely I would have seen a glint of moisture at the corners of her eyes. But I looked across the room at the storm-darkened windowpane instead, wondering if I'd picked the best possible time for what I'd decided to do. Even if I hadn't, I told myself, I would be no further away than the end of the hall, and could return immediately if she decided that I'd left her alone for too long.

"Perhaps you'd better lie down and try to get a little rest," I said. "You'll have a better chance of accomplishing that if I'm not here. I won't be gone for longer than an hour."

"All right," she said. "But please don't feel you have to leave. I won't be able to sleep, either now or tonight."

"Just lie down and shut your eyes anyway," I advised. "Try it. Sheer exhaustion can sometimes make you doze off, even when you feel you'll be certain to stay awake."

I bent and kissed her, running my forefinger caressingly up and down the nape of her neck.

At the door I paused just long enough to say: "to an archeologist a small artifact can seem one of the most precious things on earth. Your father may have decided he wasn't going to part with what he had every right to feel had become his property. If a buried object is thousands of years old no other living man has as valid a claim to it as an archeologist who has traveled half way around the world to explore earth's buried treasures."

I passed out into the hall and shut the door very firmly behind me.

It was true, every word of it. If Margrave had decided he had no intention of giving up whatever it was he had found, despite threats which he had every reason to take seriously, he had displayed quite exceptional courage . . . it takes a high degree of courage to defy threats of that nature.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Why must someone like myself, with hardly a trace of self-tormenting impulses in his nature, succumb at times to a compulsive need to explore every aspect of an experience it would be wise to bury forever in the deepest crypt of memory?

Is it because no one likes to feel he has been singled out, from among millions of people who have never been threatened by the unknown, as just the right kind of target and forced to endure a frightful kind of uncertainty? It is natural to resent that, to struggle to defend yourself before it is too late and you find yourself weaponless. You must attack, strike back. But to do so you must be armed with as much knowledge of your invisible adversary as you can summon to your aid.

I thought that was the reason, was sure of it, in fact. I was both angrily resentful and—genuinely frightened. I had to know more, even if it meant taking tremendous risks and exposing myself to the deadliest kind of danger.

The instant I shut the door of my room I turned the key in the lock, because an unexpected interruption could have more than doubled the danger. Then I went to a four-drawer chest by the window, opened the bottom drawer and took out a drawing board, a sketching pencil and brush, and some tempera colors in small vials—red, blue, and yellow.

I'd discovered from the three times I'd taken such a risk in the past that sketching the horror first, as clearly as I could remember it, was more likely to bring the shadow into view than just an intense effort of concentration.

There is nothing as powerfully evocative as an image, as the first man probably discovered long before his prehistoric descendents took to fashioning idols in clay or stone. It is a quite simple matter to pick up a stick and trace the outlines of some dread shape in mud or clay, and some recent experiments with the great apes make it unmistakably plain that it can become a simian accomplishment as well.

But it was not just a crude outline I intended to trace on the single sheet of sketching paper I'd removed from the cabinet, along with the paints and drawing board. I've no great artistic talent. But I was quite sure that what the first man must have done very crudely, even an unskilled, late twentieth-century child could have accomplished on a much higher level by turning out a sketch that would, by comparison, seem like a masterpiece by Van Gogh. And I was a late twentieth-century adult.

I had done fairly well before, but this time I intended to make absolute accuracy my goal. I would probably not achieve it, for memory is always flawed. But I had the feeling that what I was going to sketch would bear so close a resemblance to what I had seen in the depths of a mountain cave that I might have to fight against crumpling the drawing up before the shadow began to form. A cold chill can be endured. But when your heart pounds too furiously you can find it impossible to breathe, and must seek some quick way of easing the strain.

I would be taking, I knew, a double risk. If a painted or sculptured image of some horror lurking just beyond the borderland of the known could summon it forth as a living presence, a hideous memory transferred from an image in the mind to an image apart from the mind could become just as sanity-threatening.

A nightmare could seem terrifingly real and imagination alone could conjure up the most monstrous of phantoms. But when you drew or painted such a phantom of the mind you created a new entity, even more dreadful to look upon. You created a new kind of aliveness, endowed with form and substance—concrete, touchable, with a coloration that did not change or fade.

No wonder some artists had been driven mad by their own creations, unable to bear the terrible realness of what they had been able to endure before taking up pencil or brush or sculptor's clay solely because a mental image can, by an act of will, be made to vanish.

It is never that way with a painting or a figure in clay or stone. It can be made to vanish, yes—with the aid of a knife or a hammer. But one glance at a perfected creation can often paralyze the will to destroy it, or one can hesitate and be lost. And even if the will exists, few artists can endure the thought of destroying their own creations and are likely to wait too long.

Just how great, I wondered, would the risk be now, when my drawing neared completion and I laid down my sketching pencil and took up the paintbrush, to color it red and blue and yellow. Red for the enormous, pointed ears and ocher for—

I put a quick stop to such thoughts. In the first place I was not an artist. I had set absolute accuracy as my goal, but that did not mean that I could achieve a lifelike accuracy. I would have tried for that, too, but I was sure it was beyond me. Even, on rare occasions, it had been beyond the greatest of artists, Rembrandt included.

No, I could not hope to breathe immortal fire into what I intended to sketch and that fact alone would preserve me from what I feared most. As for the evocation, the shadow slowly forming in the room—that was a danger that I would be deliberately courting. It was what I sought, what I was hoping would happen, and if it failed to happen my effort would be in vain.

There were three chairs in the room and I crossed to the largest one—an easy chair with an adjustable back which I had left completely vertical—sat down, and laid the drawing board across my knees. I attached the sketching paper to it with thumbtacks, after setting the other materials down on the floor, and with the pencil firmly in my grasp stared about the room.

It was a pleasant, small room, exactly the kind of room I would have chosen if I had lived in a mansion with twenty or thirty much larger ones. It had been set apart by Margrave for my use, sometimes just on weekends and sometimes for the ten days or two weeks I'd spent working in close collaboration with him on a new book. That had happened several times in recent months and I'd come to look upon the room as very much my own. No one had ever been allowed to occupy it in my absence and it contained some of my most treasured books, manuscripts, and small, archeological artifacts.

I have never liked to think of myself as a sentimentalist but just remembering that he would never come bursting into the room again without knocking, his enthusiasm making that entirely forgivable, brought a catch to my throat.

Some artists experience great difficulty in starting a new work; others in finishing one, finding the first few brush or pen strokes the easiest of all. It was hard for me to start for a quite different reason, which had nothing to do with art.

When you don't know what will happen at the end you can draw back from making the first few strokes, because when once you have started you've taken a great leap forward into what may become an abyss so dark and all-engulfing that there will be no way for you to save yourself. Shapes appear and vanish into the darkness and you go right on falling without knowing whether you're continuing to create them or some demonic force has snatched the brush or pen or pencil from your hand.

It might be like that now, I told myself. When once the shadow had appeared I might cease to be sitting in a small pleasant room, familiar to me, with a drawing board on my knees.

Not that the room was pleasant, really. It had ceased to seem that way. A chill seemed to pervade it, as if a thin coating of ice had begun to spread over every object in the room. Even the arms of the chair in which I was sitting seemed colder than they had been, and the brick-lined fireplace and the row of stone statuettes on the mantel above it, three of them grotesque satyr-shapes with splayed hooves, seemed to glimmer with an icy sheen.

There were only two pictures on the walls, depicting sailing ships of a century ago, four-masted and full-rigged, plowing through heavy seas in the teeth of a raging gale. Icicles seemed to hang from their rigging and glitter along the rails, which would have been a rare occurrence in an Atlantic storm wind at any time.

I knew the pictures and everything else in the room had undergone no actual change. I was quite sure that only a slight blurring of my vision brought about by strain had created an illusion of coldness and glitter everywhere. But it added one more distinctly unnerving factor to the way I felt when I started a sketch which I did not think would take me more than eight or ten minutes to complete. Adding the colors would come last, of course, and would be the most exacting part of the task.

To sketch something you've actually seen, solely from memory is more difficult, if accuracy is your goal, than to conjure up an image of the unknown in a completely imaginative way, despite all claims to the contrary. Both must be accurate, if an illusion of reality is to be maintained. But the second consists of shreds and patches of reality drawn from many facets of experience and fitted together in such a way that it will seem like a new creation, unlike anything that has ever existed before. Both new and unique, and, as in the present case, if such had been my purpose, creating an illusion of strangeness as well. An imaginative creation of that nature must seem to embody actual aspects of the unknown, or it will fall flat on its face.

But the first task—creating such an illusion from something you've actually seen—is much more difficult, because you cannot make use of imagination's close-to-miraculous cement. There are, in fact, no shreds and patches to fit together. It is all there in your mind, all in one piece, a totality so terrifying that your hand will quake with every brush stroke. Just the striving for accuracy will further unnerve you and make the task more difficult, for there will be aspects of the horror from which you will recoil with every fiber of your being.

You will keep telling yourself that there are certain things that should be left out, that should not be sketched at all, if your sanity is to be preserved. You must wage a constant struggle with yourself in the most terrible of all battles—for what can be more terrible than a threat of psychic destruction in a moment of dreadful peril?

I forced myself not to think of that as I began to sketch the rough outline of what would quickly enough become something quite different from an outline. I started with the head, and found that it was possible for me to shape it with a high degree of accuracy just from having done so twice before. It was not too different from a conditioned reflex, except that no such reflex can be established by just two experiences in the past.

Or can it, if the conditioning has been mind-searing? Pavlov would certainly have denied it. But he had never seen the shape in the cave from which I had fled without once looking back, hardly daring to hope that I would escape with my life, and—incredible as it now seemed to me in retrospect—not really caring too much.

Up to that moment life had seemed to me a very precious thing, self-destructiveness an urge so alien to my nature that I had felt, at times, that I was incapable of experiencing it at all and had been born a little freakish in that respect. But we never know what we are capable of experiencing until it is put to the test, and there are sights that can make the desire to go on living less attractive than you've allowed yourself to believe.

Though I was now drawing on my memory of what I'd actually seen, it was, beyond a doubt, still in an almost automatic and very superficial way. In my mind's eye I was still sitting in the room, and not standing in the cave again with the monstrous shape towering up before me and half-blotting out the sunlight at the cave's mouth.

Then, all at once, the memory flash went deep. It was the actual horror I saw again in depth, standing out with the sunlight at its back. It was as if a gray rock formation I had been observing without alarm, solely because it was oddly shaped, had turned into a living, breathing figure that had nothing in common with a shape of stone.

It hadn't occurred in precisely that way, for my eyes had not been on the walls of the cave at all. But the transformation was of that nature, sudden and unbelievable, as if where there had been nothing but rugged rock formations there was now a living horror blocking my passage that could only have become fully alive by separating itself from the rock to which it had previously been attached in some abnormal state of slumberous, age-long dormancy.

The night fears of children, the terrifying shapes which all children see at times between sleeping and waking, are often frightful enough—vulture things with long talons and flapping wings, gargoyle shapes with bared teeth and wind-supported capes sweeping down out of the night, and reptiles with clashing jaws—glistening and scaly and immense. But the shape that towered at the cave's mouth was even more terrifying, if only because a warm-blooded beast can rend and tear with its teeth with a shorter and more instant leap. And I was not a child, but an adult and could distinguish between the shadowy forms of nightmare and a living presence with death in its gleaming eyes.

The sketching pencil seemed to freeze between my fingers, preventing me from moving them, making me feel that, if I tried, some of the skin would be torn away.

The shape had the head of a wolf, with a long, crimsoned snout and pointed ears flattened against its skull, flattened for an instant and then standing straight up again. But nothing else about it was wolflike or birdlike or reptilelike. Its body was that of a huge, thick-chested dwarf, far more misshapen than even a dwarf had any right to be, with skin so scabrous and mottled and half-rotting away that it had the look of a corpse that has lain for a long time underground and should never have been dug up.

It's legs were twisted and bent, and there was a thick mat of coarse, dark hair on its chest which contrasted, incongruously, with the much lighter, grayish fur of the wolfhead, since it was of reddish cast.

Fifteen or twenty times at least since I had fled from the cave with that frightful figure pursuing me—I could still hear the clump of its footsteps on the mountain path—it had returned to pursue me again, and not always in dreams. It was nothing, of course, but a memory recall. But remembrance can ape reality at times, if fear becomes overwhelming, and each time I had seemed to see it again, as I was doing now, with my surroundings blotted out. The room or street, or wherever I happened to be when the horror returned, ceased for a moment to exist for me and I was back in the cave again, feeling my neck hairs rise as the wolfman tensed itself for a leap, with waltzing deathheads in its slitted eyes.

Twice that memory flash had come to me on a sunlit city street at midday, with pedestrians jostling me and traffic speeding past. And I had come to a sudden halt, and only when the pursuing footsteps had died away into silence had I gone stumbling on, with a tight constriction in my chest and fearing that, at any moment, I might crash to the pavement in a dead faint.

Since then, after perhaps my sixth experience of that nature, I had gained a strange kind of inner strength that I had not thought I could acquire. I had managed somehow to keep my fear from affecting me physically the way it had at first, just by telling myself that the memory flash, at least, would always remain the same, and, that since I had escaped from the horror on the mountain path by outdistancing it, there was no danger that the opposite would happen in my mind. Unless, of course, I let myself picture it as happening. And imagination can always be curbed by a deliberate effort of will.

Then I made what may have been a mistake, although I was repeating it now with full knowledge of the risk I might be taking. To test my new resolution I tried to make the memory recall occur, through an effort of concentration, in all of its seeming reality. I deliberately willed myself back in the cave again, facing the horror as I was doing now with a feeling that I had actually returned to the cave.

I succeeded only two well. The third time it happened I *sketched* the horror as I was doing now, and a faint shadow seemed to form for an instant in a far corner of the room.

The fourth time a very definite shadow appeared—exactly like the one I'd seen downstairs in the study when I'd turned from Margrave's slumped body to stare about the room, to search for indications as to how recently he had been slain and whether or not there had been a violent struggle.

The shadow had formed the instant I had completed the drawing. It had lingered for no more than a few seconds, vanishing just as the one in the study had done, diminishing a little in size before it had faded into a surrounding interplay of light and completely ordinary shadows. If it had not vanished so quickly I'm quite sure I would have torn the drawing up, and stayed in the room just long enough to see if it had grown any dimmer.

I had no intention of doing that now and suddenly my fingers were moving across the drawing board again, no longer frozen, because I had left the cave and the room with its familiar furniture had returned.

I've called it a memory recall, but I'm not sure it wasn't a clairvoyant vision, since clairvoyance can take several forms. If it can mirror a future occurrence, as it often does, or what is taking place at the same moment in time, why can't it mirror incidents which have taken place in the past? If the past never vanishes but continues to exist in another dimension of space or time, as occultists and not a few physicists claim, why could I not have seen myself as I had been and *would always be* at one particular moment in time? Caught, trapped, imprisoned for one terrible instant at the mouth of the cave and then fleeing down the mountain path with the wolfman at my heels?

Might not everything that has ever happened to us, from the cradle to the grave, be preserved in that way? And might there not be moments when the barrier between the past and the present dissolves—moments when an abnormal kind of fear can become so overwhelming that we can witness our own near-destruction by some terrible event in the past? How do we know what human emotion alone can accomplish and how much reality, as we know it, can be changed by the very intensity of our fear or some other emotion equally strong? If a clairvoyant vision can occur involuntarily, or be made to occur by a determined effort of concentration, who can say exactly what the trigger-mechanism may be like and what it takes to activate it?

I was sketching very rapidly now. The wolfhead was completed, except the heightened aspect of reality which the colors would impart, and I had almost completed the barrel-chested human monstrosity to which the head was attached by a neck so short that it seemed less manlike than the torso—a bulging mass of pinkish, veined flesh that looked not unlike a fungus growth half-crushed out of shape by the weight of the head. There were a few deep purple cinctures encircling it and these I was careful to depict. They were not purple yet, but the tempera colors would take care of that.

I continued to use only the sketching pencil for four or five more minutes. Then, satisfied with what I had accomplished, I reached down and picked up the three vials of paint. I set them down at the edge of the drawing board and searched around for the brush, which had fallen into a crevice between the cushion and the right arm of the chair.

It was a fine, watercolor brush, well suited for tempera painting as well. In another moment I was applying the colors in the three vials, using the same brush, which was no problem to squeeze clean between my thumb and forefinger, since I had merely touched the tip to the paint in each vial.

The wolfhead I left pencil-gray, except for a tiny touch of crimson to the eyes. I used all of the colors very sparingly, leaving the drawing in the main a pencil sketch. A great deal can be accomplished in that way, for if I had attempted to color the drawing until it took on the look of a painting a certain all-important suggestiveness would have been lost. It was only through suggestion, I felt, that I could do justice to the utter frightfulness of the figure in the cave, and the impression it had made on me. There was something secret, hidden, in some strange way veiled about it, as if what I had seen had cloaked an even greater hideousness, and a depth of wickedness beyond the capacity of the human mind to grasp. That, too, had to be conveyed—or, at the very least, hinted at—if I wanted the evocation to succeed. Frightfulness responds to frightfulness, and if I neglected to convey what I had felt, as well as what I had seen, my sketch might well have failed to achieve its purpose on that account alone.

Color, applied to a magical object in a certain way, can have a symbolical meaning which transcends the realistic aspects of art, as every archeologist knows. Tribal witch doctors know it, too—even the headhunters of New Guinea know it. In Pre-Dynastic Egypt the bones of the dead were colored red, in the hope that, in some half-mystical way, it would restore the circulation of the blood, and make the decaying flesh still clinging to the bones come to life again and fill out and become as firm in another realm of existence as it had been on this side of the grave.

I had recapped the last vial, and was bending over to set all three vials down on the floor again, when the room suddenly seemed less bright than it had been. The diminishment in its brightness was very slight, but I somehow became chillingly aware of it before I straightened up in the chair, and grasped the drawing board firmly to prevent it from sliding from my knees.

They had begun to tremble a little and it was something I could not control.

I kept my eyes averted for an instant, fearful of what I might see if I looked directly toward the blank stretch of wall between the two windows. It was from that direction that the darkening had come, as I could now see plainly enough by the very slight darkening of the floorboards directly in front of the chair.

Can a shadow cast a shadow? Not all shadows perhaps, but if it had been merely a darkening caused by a sudden blocking off of the light it would not, I was sure, have assumed so definite a shape. Faint as it was, I could make out features which struck a chill to my heart.

I raised my eyes and looked directly toward the opposite wall, cursing myself for my cowardice in keeping them lowered, even for a moment.

The shadow was enormous, and it seemed to hover in the air without visible support just below the ceiling, the great wolfhead clearly outlined but the hideously deformed body with its crooked legs much less so.

Only the head was motionless. The body dangled in a gruesome way, swaying slowly back and forth as if dangling from a rope that had tightened about the horror's throat. The absence of a rope and the fact that I saw it less distinctly could not prevent me from feeling that, at any moment, it would part from the head, severed at the neck, and come rolling and bumping toward me across the floor, no longer a shadow, but a headless torso with the dead flesh hanging from it in shreds.

There was only one thing in which I could take pride. I resisted an impulse to rip the sketch from the drawing board, and tear it up, or crumple it between my fingers. It would have been a mad thing to do, because if it vanished as quickly as it had in the study I would have possessed no further knowledge concerning it. But up to that moment, I had been far from sure I would not defeat my purpose by desperately attempting to make it vanish and rushing from the room in blind panic.

So far I hadn't done that. But I knew it could still happen. I've lived long enough to know that when you've won a brief victory over fear there's nothing permanent about it. You're just as likely—perhaps more likely—to let go afterward.

And I hadn't really won a victory over fear, even a small one. I'd just conquered an impulse to make the great risk I was taking meaningless.

But at least I was putting up a struggle. I didn't move or touch the sketch even when the great shadowy head began to advance further into the room, and descend lower, its jaws opening and closing.

Its ears began to quiver and seemed to become sharper, more pointed. Abruptly, a ferocious animation possessed it. It came sweeping toward me across the room, carrying its dangling body with it.

Suddenly, it was towering over me, less than twenty feet from where I was sitting. The drawing board slipped from my knees and crashed to the floor. My knees were shaking, but I gave that no heed, because a greater trembling seemed to have taken hold of me inwardly.

It was a frightening thing in itself, as if every fiber of my being had begun to quake and vibrate, as if I'd lost all control over my emotions. It was like a rising wind inside of me, filling me, shaking me, with a tuning-fork kind of vibrancy.

In another moment, I told myself, with a terrible feeling of certainty, I would no longer be what I had been, endowed with purpose and reason and self-mastery. I would become a vehicle, a victim, of something that was apart from myself, and yet would take possession of me in so complete a way that I, too, would cease to be human.

I fought the feeling, knowing that certainty can sometimes prove an illusion, and that if I surrendered to it I would be totally lost forever.

I think it was the fire that saved me. It began on the other side of the room, sweeping across the mantel, causing each of the small statuettes to burst into flame. They were of stone and yet flame enveloped them, as if so great heat had been generated in the room that even stone could turn combustible in an instant. Yet I felt no heat, only the frightful vibrancy in every part of my body.

The fire brought me to my feet in wild alarm, for I knew that if it were not put out immediately it would spread and turn the entire room into a blazing inferno.

I was still wearing the windbreaker I had put on after I'd finished shaving and gone downstairs to Margrave's study five hours previously. I ripped it off before I got to the mantel, and started smothering the flames with it, without once glancing back to see if a fire had started up where the horror towered.

A kind of wild irrationality possessed me. Smothering the flames that had swept across the mantel became my sole consideration, taking precedence over everything else. Perhaps the towering shape would change its position and start moving toward the mantel before I could thrash out the flames. Perhaps the wolfhead would descend and sink its teeth in my back. Or an inferno could already have started, filling half of the room with flames that nothing could smother.

But I heard no roaring, felt no heat, except from the flames on the mantel as I brought the windbreaker down again and again with frantic haste, not caring if I burned my hands badly.

In another moment I had suceeded in putting out all of the flames. The mantel had a charred, smoke-blackened look, and two of the statuettes had been reduced to ashes. But all of the small, flickering flames had been extinguished. Thin spirals of smoke still arose from both ends of the mantel, but I could see that there was no danger that the wood would burst into flame again.

The other fear—it should have been a hundred times as overwhelming, but I had succeeded in almost blotting it from my mind for an instant—now returned in full force.

I turned slowly, half-expecting to see the wolfhead with its dangling dwarf body still hovering by the chair, and half-expecting to confront a more terrifying reality—the awful presence of a shape that had moved to within five or six feet of me, and had been merely waiting for me to turn to fall upon me and sink its teeth in my throat.

But I saw nothing. The room was completely empty again. There wasn't the faintest trace of a shadow that had taken on a ghastly kind of bodily substance, and could rend and destroy as no shadow could ever do.

My drawing board lay where it had fallen, with the paper on which I had sketched the horror still attached to it. I could see the sketch clearly from where I was standing, with the bright, scarcely dried tempera colors—red and blue and yellow—gleaming in the overhead light. Beyond the windows the storm was still darkening the world outside, blotting out all of the sunlight. But the downstreaming glow of electric bulbs still shed a warm, mellow radiance inside the room—a radiance that was quite unlike a raging conflagration.

I crossed back to the chair, sat down, and picked up the drawing board. I was still trembling, so violently that I almost dropped the board again, from my hands and not from between my knees this time. Somehow that was a comfort in the thought that there were degrees of agitation and that trembling hands could be more readily brought under control, and soon would be.

The paper on which I had sketched the horror seemed to be slightly darkened about the edges, as if it had been in close proximity to intense heat, but had not become charred.

It was a strange kind of heat apparently, intense and yet fluctuating, bursting into flame on the opposite side of the room, but not even crisping a paper where it could well have been most intense.

I looked down at the floor. It was of the same kind of highly polished, natural-grained hardwood as the floor of the study. But instead of six small scatter rugs only a single large rug covered about two-thirds of it. There were no singe markings on the rug, but in one spot on the bare floorboards there was a small human footprint, which looked as if it had been burned into the wood by an iron heated to incandescence.

It brought the fluctuating factor more forcibly home to me. Seemingly, the footprints of the horror's dwarfish body could turn fiery, but only one foot had done so—unless it had stood for a moment on one leg, and that seemed unlikely.

For an instant I had an impulse to relieve the way I felt with a wild burst of unnatural merriment—to just sit very still and laugh mirthlessly. But I fought against the impulse because it would have brought no real relief. It would only have made me aware of how seriously my sanity was being threatened by something which I'd never doubted for a moment, but which seemed continuously to become more unendurable. In the cave I had fled from the horror's presence without knowing it could turn fiery. I had never for a moment doubted the reality of what I had seen. But that it could set fires that could burn a house to the ground unless the flames were quickly extinguished hadn't occurred to me until I'd seen the singed scatter rug in the study and Doris had told me what kind of threat the small, neatly attired visitor who called himself Ruschna had made in her presence two days previously.

He had predicted that Margrave would perish in a house swept by fire, and although Margrave had been killed in another way I would have been trapped in a blazing room if I hadn't gotten to the mantel in time to beat out the flames before they could spread to the walls and furniture.

Fire was certainly as closely associated with the shape I had seen as the ghastly physical aspect it assumed when it ceased to be a shadow, and the great wolfhead took on form and substance.

Why then had it used a bludgeon to slay with when both fire and the fangs of a wolf could destroy in just as terrible a way, and make the use of a weapon needless? Could it be because a bludgeon did not undergo any change, except when it was shattered by the force of a blow?

Could it be that it was only over such a weapon that it had absolute control at all times? That its power to destroy by fire or a wolf's savagely rending jaws could fluctuate and change, undergoing a transformation over which it had far less than absolute, or totally predictable, control? What if it could slay in all three ways, but that only one could be depended on never to fail? And might I not be forgetting something else that would have made the use of a bludgeon—that was a ceremonial staff and not just a carven, ornamental cane—well in accord with whatever dark and mysterious forces had brought it into being in some age remote from ours? A ceremonial staff that could dissolve all barriers between the known and the unknown, and that did not even need to be waved when it was used to slay with?

Brindley had taken the staff with him, and it would be displayed at the inquest as if it were no more than a rather unusual murder weapon. He had even recovered the broken-off, lower end from the pool. But that did not mean that there was only one staff that dread shape had used in the past and that it would be unable to secure another, even if it was temporarily weaponless. And of that I was far from sure. It seemed unlikely, in fact, that it would have tossed the broken weapon into the pool if it had not been absolutely certain that securing another one would be the opposite of difficult. A broken staff could have been repaired, and I doubted if ceremonial magic could dissolve and drain away in the water of a swimming pool if the force from which it emanated willed otherwise.

Brindley might be making a mistake, I told myself, if he thought differently. I did not envy him his possession of a weapon that had seemed to possess a strange, hideous life of its own when the dangling leather strips attached to it had twined themselves around Helen's legs. I had dismissed such a thought at the time, had been sure that it was just something she had imagined. But I had forgotten what I had often felt might be true—that throughout the whole of nature the inanimate may not be as lifeless as it seems. How much easier would it be to feel that way about a ceremonial staff that had been lowered and raised and lowered again in a lethal way by a shape that could cause the stone statuettes on a mantel to burst into flame?

I had been sitting motionless in the chair for two or three full minutes, gripping the drawing board tightly with both hands to still their trembling. But now I bent and set it down again on the floor, wondering why I'd picked it up at all.

I had not glanced at the drawing again and had no intention of doing so. But ripping it from the board and crumpling it in my hand had suddenly seemed no longer necessary—rather senseless, in fact.

Only one thing made complete sense to me now. I had left Doris alone in her room for more than an hour. The storm was still rising outside, and if she had been unable to close her eyes and keep them closed until drowsiness came upon her, as I'd urged her to do, she might be desperately hoping that I would return and take her into my arms and hold her as tightly as I'd done before.

The night was still several hours away. There was no need for her to be alone—or for me to be alone for a moment longer. How could I be sure she was not in danger? I remained unshaken in my conviction—it might well have been totally unjustified—that the horror had left my room and would not immediately return. But what if it had immediately gone elsewhere? What if it had gone to her room?

CHAPTER NINE

I was moving toward the door when I heard a sudden clattering sound. It was very loud and was coming from outside the door, as if someone had just come up the stairs and was running swiftly along the hall toward the room in spiked shoes.

The next instant the door was flung open and Dan came staggering into the room.

He looked ghastly. His clothes were ripped in three or four places, and there was an ugly dark bruise on his right temple, and two long scratches on his chest where his shirt had been torn away. Though they did not seem quite gash-deep, they were oozing blood, and stood out with a crimson gleaming in the overhead light.

His hands flailed wildly for an instant, as if he desperately wanted to tell me something, but shock had made it impossible for him to speak.

He began to sway and might well have fallen if I hadn't grabbed hold of his shoulders and helped him to steady himself, gesturing toward the chair I'd just vacated.

"Sit down, Dan," I urged. "Just sit down before you try to talk. Standing's no good. There's nothing to be gained by it."

"It can't wait," he choked. "A man I've never seen before attacked me on the stairs when I tried to make him let go of Doris. He's on the road by now and Doris won't be able to do any more struggling. She went limp when he struck her with his fist on the head. He struck her twice and he's carrying her slung over his shoulder."

His fingers bit into my wrist. "We've got only one chance of overtaking him before he disappears in the woods. He couldn't have taken my car, because I've got the ignition key. And there's no other car outside now."

For an instant I felt even more in need of support than he had been. But there are moments when no shock can be so great or the need of haste so urgent that it can keep you from asking questions so vital that, if you fail to ask them, you'll be handicapped at the start in whatever you may attempt to do.

"What did he look like," I asked. "Quick—tell me. *I've got to know.*"

"A small man, but tremendously powerful. He had the strength of a giant. He seemed to grow in height when he attacked me. He changed, looked different. I can't explain it—I couldn't defend myself. It was if some savage beast had hurled itself at me—a beast with steel-sharp claws. But I managed to break free and when I looked back, just once, he was picking Doris up. It was as if she had no weight at all. Compared to his strength—no weight at all. I knew that to attempt to stop him again would have been madness. I knew I'd need help—Oh, God."

"All right," I said. "You've got it. We'll need a weapon. Think quickly. We'll both think. What is there in this room we can use?"

He pointed toward the fireplace. "Andirons," he said. "Two of them."

"Yes, good. Nothing better, outside of a gun."

I strode to the mantel, picked both of the andirons up and crossed back to his side.

"Here. Take this and hold on to it," I said. "Overtaking him comes first. Overpowering him may be harder, but we don't have to think about that yet. We can't afford to lose another second. Where are the car keys?"

"Right here in my pocket," he said. "I always carry them."

"Thank God for that. We can talk in the car. Come on, don't stop for anything. We've got to get down the stairs and out the front door fast. If you fall and graze your knees it's nothing. Pick yourself up, and keep right on moving."

It was the kind of advice I felt he might need, because he had begun to sway again.

When he got to the foot of the stairs I came very close to forgetting what I had told him for five or six seconds, because what we saw caused us to come to a brief halt.

The deputy whom Brindley had left to guard the house lay sprawled out on the floor midway between the foot of the stairs and the piano alcove, with one knee drawn up and both of his arms flung wide. I could see at a glance that he had to be dead, because there was nothing but a gleaming redness where his throat had been. His head was twisted to one side in so unnatural a way that I had to look away quickly and grip the banister for support.

Almost instantly, however, I succeeded in transferring the grip to Dan's arm. "Remember what I said about stopping," I reminded him. "He's beyond saving, but Doris isn't. No matter how horrible that is—" I gestured toward the slain deputy.

"I'm not a fool," Dan breathed. "Stop giving me orders."

"All right, fine," I said. "I didn't think you were—but I had to remind you."

I moved past the slain man without glancing at him again, got to the front door a little ahead of Dan, and flung it open, letting him precede me onto the terrace.

The instant we were outside the house the rising wind smote us in so violent a gust that I had to stand still for an instant as Dan fought his way down the steps to the lawn. His car, a yellow sports roadster, still stood on the driveway to the right of the path that led to the swimming pool.

The thought had crossed my mind that the small man with the strength of a giant might have come to the house in a car of his own, but I refused to take that possibility too seriously. I was nine-tenths convinced that he was the same small man who had stood at the door of Margrave's study mouthing vicious threats two days previously, and nothing had been said about a car driving up and departing.

Though he'd left before my return from the village, I was sure that if he'd arrived in a car Doris would have mentioned it. That far from ruled out the possibility that he had a car. But it made his ownership of one seem less likely. It made me wonder also if he might not live in the vicinity, and have no need of a car to visit the home of a man he had crossed half of Europe and the Atlantic to threaten.

A shout from Dan put a quick end to thoughts I should have thrust aside for the moment. I was letting the very thing I had cautioned him against keep me on the terrace longer than it had taken him to race across the lawn to the car and climb into the driver's seat.

He had clicked on the ignition and was bending over the wheel when I got into the seat at his side, and slammed the door shut. In another moment the car was in motion and we were speeding along the driveway, with the wind whistling around and over the windshield. Even before we emerged on the road the speedometer had started to soar and we were hitting a hundred before the distance between the house and the double row of trees that marked the beginning of the forest had diminished by fifty yards.

"What makes you think he kept to the road at all?" I asked. "He didn't have to. He could have reached the woods in a more roundabout way, or gone toward the dense cluster of saplings on the opposite side of the house."

"That's just a grove," Dan reminded me. "No real concealment there. If he hasn't a car, making for the woods in a straight course would be the most natural thing for him to have done."

"Do you think he had a car?"

"I don't know. But after all that's happened, with the police so recently here, and perhaps a roadblock still thrown up where Saunders found the fifth body wouldn't it be a more natural thing for him to have come back on foot?"

It was something that hadn't occurred to me. But it strengthened what I'd just been telling myself on the terrace. It was true, of course. Not only a murderer, but any prowler with a criminal purpose in mind would be unlikely to travel down an open road in a car in a region guarded closely by the law.

But a nagging doubt remained, persistent enough to make me ask, "If he headed straight down this road on foot wouldn't he be still in sight? It's quite a distance to the first sharp turn."

"He'd have had time enough to reach the forest," Dan said. "Just about—no more. It would be drawing it close, but if Doris wasn't much of a burden he could have made it in the time we've lost."

"That would mean he's probably in the woods by now, unless he kept right on along the road," I said. "And I don't think he'd do that for long. But we've no way of knowing exactly where he left the road. He might have kept on for a short distance beyond the first turn and even gone as far as the second turn. If he's heading for a definite destination the quickest way of reaching it might be further along."

"We'll have a good chance of overtaking him if he doesn't leave the road until he gets to the second turn," Dan said. "But it seems more likely he has plunged into the woods already."

"That won't help us at all," I said. "It could be anywhere within several hundred feet. That he'd leave some kind of a trail for us to follow would be unlikely in any case. But if we don't even know where to look—"

"It might help a little if we kept two or three things in mind," Dan said. "There's one point beyond which I can't see him keeping to the road—the spot where the body was found. We don't even know if it has been taken away, and if there's still a roadblock there I've a feeling he knows about it. So he'd cut into the woods before he came to that point, but—"

He paused, as if carefully weighing what he was about to say. "If he did have some definite destination he was heading for, might not the spot where the body was found, be where he'd be *most likely* to turn off and plunge into the woods? It's a long shot. But it could provide the best clue we have as to where he might have left the road, if he hasn't already vanished into the trees.

"The spot where the body was found would be more likely than not—a great deal more likely, perhaps—to be fairly close to where he's living, or to some nearby cave he's been using as a hideout. It doesn't have to be. It could be miles away, just as the house may have been. He may have come a long distance to slay, both in the house and on the road. He may have encountered someone walking along the road purely by accident when he left the house and slain him to vent his rage on an additional victim—if he was as homicidally mad as Saunders seems to believe. Don't you see, John?"

"It doesn't have to mean he came from anywhere in the immediate vicinity. I'm just saying it's a search possibility that's worth keeping in mind if he *hasn't* already vanished in the woods."

I had more than that to keep in mind. There were things, I knew, that it would have been the worst kind of mistake to tell him when steadiness of purpose was our greatest immediate need. I had far less firm a capacity for such steadiness than he did now, even though it had been otherwise at first. He had been quicker to recover from the shock of what had happened, because the danger that Doris was in hadn't shaken and tormented him as much as it had me. His concern for her safety was certainly as great as any close friend could have experienced. But only if Helen had been struck down and carried from the house as Doris had been could he have felt that getting her back again meant more to him than his own life—if death should be the price he might have to pay.

Since his steadiness had now become greater than mine, it was far too valuable a thing to jeopardize by trying to convince him that the man who had attacked him on the stairs was just one small part of a greater horror, and was, for that reason, a man whose behavior might follow no predictable pattern. It would have shattered his confidence by striking a blow at everything he was struggling to believe.

True, he had good reason to know that the mansion had become like no other house, because of what he and Helen had seen in the study. But the questions I'd asked him could have done little more than add to his lack of understanding. The human mind is just compartmentalized enough, in the absence of positive knowledge, to often keep two occurrences of a terrifying nature from rushing together and becoming joined in an even more terrifying way.

Though the man he'd struggled with on the stairs had seemed to him to possess an almost inhuman kind of strength, he'd stopped just short of associating him with the shadow, or so I had every reason to believe. Apparently he had thought of him only as Saunders's maniacal killer, returning to the house, after Brindley's departure, to claim another victim.

If I told him about the fire I'd smothered I was sure he would not share Brindley's skepticism. He would remember that Helen had been left alone in the house, and might well turn back, too alarmed to pay the slightest attention to whatever else I might say.

I could not have stopped him if he decided that Helen's safety came first, that even saving Doris would have to be put off. I wasn't sure I would have had the right to struggle with him, and take possession of the car. It was his wife and his car, and Helen's safety meant just as much to him as Doris's did to me. If Doris had been left alone in the house, and Helen carried off, I knew that I would have felt the same way.

But love can force cruel decisions on a man and not telling him was another matter. The choice had been made, the die cast, and it would have been madness to turn back now. Doris was in the greatest danger, even though Helen was in very real danger. Or possibly I was mistaken about that. What if the house caught fire again and burned to the ground?

Would I ever forgive myself for not stopping long enough before leaving the house to rush back upstairs to the second-floor guest room, and insist that she accompany us, no matter how Dan might have felt about exposing her to another kind of danger? I would have done so, but my concern for Doris's safety had been so immediately overwhelming *I just hadn't thought of it.* But if the house burned down with Helen in it would I ever be able to justify what I'd failed to do?

I hadn't even asked Dan where he'd left Helen and why he had gone downstairs just when he did, and encountered the intruder leaving with Doris. But probably she was still in her room, safe enough for the moment. Or so he must have felt, or he would never have left the house with me. But safe for how long?

We were almost at the first turn in the road now and the forest wall loomed up before us, the treetops in continuous motion as the wind lashed at them. I had a sudden, almost uncontrollable impulse to turn and look back. What if there was already a glow in the sky from a house that was enveloped in darting tongues of flame?

It was the kind of impulse that had to be resisted—*had to be*—or I would lose all emotional control and start going down and down into a dark abyss of unreason that would make saving Doris as impossible as saving Helen would have been.

It was then that we heard it—a far-off cry such as only an animal could have made. It could have come from the throat of a dog, for it was almost a baying and it did not sound wolflike exactly. It lasted for only a moment, so how could I be sure?

I had never heard a wolf howling, not even in Eastern Europe where there are many wolves. The sound had been mercifully spared me, even when I had roamed the mountain passes alone in the dark of the moon.

Margrave had often discussed it with me—how infrequently you even so much as caught sight of a wolf in regions where they were supposed to be most abundant. But he at least had not been unfamiliar with that most chilling of all animal sounds. He had heard it many times, on the Siberian steppes as well as in the Balkans.

But he was not here with me now. Only Dan heard it and nudged my arm and said something that belied the uneasiness in his voice.

"The woods seem to be full of stray dogs. That's the third time I've heard a baying like that in the past two weeks. It's a damned shame they're allowed to roam half-starved through the woods."

Cruelty to animals had always angered Dan, and once or twice I had seen him become enraged because some slight neglect had been inflicted on a pet. But it was scarcely the kind of remark he would have made at such a moment, unless he was trying very hard to convince himself that it had been a dog which we had heard.

We had passed around the first sharp turn and for an instant the road ahead looked like a cavern between high cliff walls overgrown with great masses of seaweed, for there had been a brief lull in the rising wind. The foliage on both sides of the road formed an unbroken expanse of greenery that had an almost translucent look. It seemed both glistening and wet, as if some great wave of the sea had just washed over it and left a totally stationary landscape in its wake, peculiarly scoured and shining.

But the rain had not yet come and the aspect of glistening wetness seemed to vanish the moment the branches of the trees came to life again. A fierce gust of wind sent some of them sweeping down over the road, and others spiraling upward in a flurry of ripped-away leaves.

Suddenly, the car gave a violent lurch and skidded all the way across the road. It barely missed crashing into a tree and then swung back on the road again and came to a halt with a screeching of brakes.

"We hit something!" Although Dan shouted the words the roar of the wind seemed even louder, as if a gust of unusual violence had struck the car the instant it had started to skid.

The thought that it might have been a blowout flashed across my mind almost instantly, for surely that was more likely to cause a car to lurch and skid than some obstacle on a road that wasn't even slightly wet.

But Dan seemed convinced that he was right, for when he got out of the car he didn't stop and bend to look at the tires, but dashed straight to the front of the car and stared down.

In another instant he was on his knees in the middle of the road, tugging at something I couldn't see that had, apparently, become entangled in one of the wheels. Or perhaps it had been hurled against the hood with such violence that it had been carried with the car to the edge of the road and back to where Dan had brought the skidding vehicle to a halt, with so abrupt a grinding of brakes that I'd feared for an instant it might overturn.

When Dan stood up he was holding something in his hand that looked like a small, furry animal with a body so long that its tail grazed the road. His lips were set in tight lines and he got into the car without saying a word, and laid it across his knees.

It was drenched with blood, but I think he was too shaken to give a thought to what might happen to his trousers. Or too consumed with a need to examine it as quickly as possible in a position that would enable me to see it as well. It was not what I would have done, but I have done many other things, just as startling and unusual, under the stress of strong emotion.

When he finally spoke he told me nothing that I could not see for myself. "It's a weasel," he said. "It's not crushed. The front wheel didn't pass over it apparently. It just became sufficiently entangled in the wheel to make the car go into an erratic skid."

"But its throat is slashed," I heard myself saying, "from ear to ear. It must have been badly mangled."

"Not so much slashed as torn out," Dan said. "Look closely. There's a great deal of missing flesh. It's as if some other animal had started to devour it before the car struck it."

"Possibly some other animal did," I said. "It could have been slain some time ago, in fact, and left lying on the road by an animal that wasn't especially hungry."

"There's only one thing wrong with that," he said. "It's still alive, quivering and alive. Can't you see?"

What he'd said was true, I realized. The faintest of tremors were still passing over it.

"All right," I said. "The animal could have just gone back between the trees. It could have become frightened when it heard our car coming."

"And not carry its prey with it? So small a mammal? Do large animals with a small prey between their jaws do that as a rule? Carnivores almost always do just the opposite when they become alarmed. It's instinctive in dogs, jackals—any canine beast of prey. Have you never watched a dog retreat with a bone when it has reason to fear you'll grab hold of it by the collar and take the bone away?

"Besides," he added. "We had a clear view of the road for a considerable distance. We'd have certainly seen an animal as large as even a small dog leaving the road and vanishing in the woods."

"We didn't see the weasel," I said.

"That's not in the least surprising—if it wasn't moving about, just lying flat on the road and quivering a little as it is doing now. It's small enough to look like a broken-off branch, torn from a tree by the wind. We passed one a short distance back, and there are two more right up ahead. You'd pass them with barely a glance unless you had reason to believe you'd be in danger of running over a weasel or a turtle. A car can usually pass right over a small, fallen branch without causing more than a jar—sometimes no jar at all. So, as a rule, you don't give it a thought."

"You didn't apparently," I said. "I wish to God you had. Just what are you trying to tell me, Dan? We can't afford to lose any more time."

"I think you know," he said. "There are some things you can't hope to keep concealed, John—not from a ten-year-old child. Did you ever see a wolf walking? I never have, but I think you did once—somewhere, sometime. I had a long talk with Margrave I never told you about, some eight months ago. He let a few things drop, the Pandora's box came open just a crack, and I saw inside."

"I didn't tell you at the swimming pool when we found the murder weapon. I played the ignoramus, because in some respects that's what I am. I wanted to hear exactly what you would say. But at the back of my mind there was this terrible doubt, this fear—all the time. It never left me, and it hasn't now. Tell me something, John. Do you believe there is any truth at all in the werewolf legend?"

"No," I lied, very quickly, feeling that if I hesitated for the barest instant he would know that I was lying.

"It's the grossest kind of superstitious nonsense," I went on. "It originated in Eastern Europe in the Dark Ages. A myth of that nature isn't difficult to—"

"All right, let's drop it, John. I had to know. I had to ask, because I want to go on believing that the man who attacked me on the stairs is just what he seemed. A paranoid killer—nothing more. Otherwise I might not be of much help to you, John—not much help, I'm afraid. But there are three things it's hard for me to put out of my mind. The slayings were all very brutal—it seems almost as if only a savage beast could have killed Margrave and the others. And in the study Helen and I encountered something just as terrible, but even harder to explain. An unknown something, darker, more mysterious. And now—a weasel with its throat torn out by something that almost had to be invisible to kill in that way and disappear. What am I to think, John? What can I believe?"

"Two things," I said. "I'm going to get out of the car and toss this sanguinary little horror into the underbrush. It isn't really a horror—I shouldn't have said that—because it's just a slain, small animal. I'm against hunting, and I've never engaged in it. But when I was a kid I used to go hunting with my dad. He favored a double-barreled shotgun, and many times he held in his hand a bird or small mammal that looked no different from this weasel. Held it and showed it to me without feeling that it would shock me in any way, with the blood running down between his fingers.

"The throat of this small animal may have the look you mentioned, but the car alone could have torn it out easily enough. It could have left shreds of flesh scattered all across the road. I'm sure that if we made a thorough search you'd be convinced. But that would be rather foolish, don't you think—just to set your mind at rest? We'd lose a great deal more time."

"I know," Dan said. "You're right, of course. We can't afford to lose any more time."

"You asked me what you could believe. When you see it disappear into the underbrush you can believe that you don't have to give it another thought. I'll make sure it's dead first, of course."

I picked up the andiron and looked at him. "I'd better use this. You needn't watch."

"I don't mind watching a merciful act," he said.

I nodded, took the weasel out of his lap, and got out of the car.

"The second thing you can believe is this," I said. "The man who attacked you and carried Doris off can be killed by a bullet or knocked insensible by a blow on the head. We're going to find him and whatever we have to do, we will do."

I felt it might be just as well if Dan didn't see me put a quick end to the weasel's life, despite what he had said, so I walked to the back of the car and did what had to be done. I brought the andiron down three times. Then I walked across the road and tossed the dead animal as far as I could into the underbrush.

I was just turning to recross the road to the car when the edge of the underbrush a few feet further along, where it was unusually dense, seemed perceptibly to darken. Slowly the darkening began to spread, very much as some black and noisome mist might have done if on some specter-haunted road the laws of nature had suffered a temporary eclipse. Each tangle of vines and creepers close to the ground and higher up among the interlacing boughs became suffused with the darkening, turning from yellow and green to deep bronze and then, more gradually, to jet black.

Across the road, extending almost as far as the car, there spread a wider and less variegated kind of darkening that slowly assumed a more familiar shape—familiar to me by now, but always alien and strange and utterly terrifying as well. It was as if what was familiar was within a cocoon that had been spun by some monstrous entity that resembled a caterpillar in only one respect.

A caterpillar had to remain for a long time in smothering folds of darkness before a transformation took place within its pupa-body that would enable it to emerge again into the light. And deep within some unimaginable womb of outer darkness the great wolfhead might well have had to undergo, in some age remote from ours, a gestation just as prolonged. Or so I had always felt. But it was not a winged and beautiful creature that had emerged, but a shape of all horror.

The shadow was rising as it lengthened and I was almost sure that Dan had seen it, too, for he was sitting motionless in the car, staring straight in my direction.

There was a rigidity in his posture that gave him the look of a man so completely unnerved and distraught that he was totally incapable of crying out. The fear that had come upon me was making my heart beat so tumultuously that I could hardly breathe, and my own safety was of more immediate concern to me. I did not honestly feel there was anything craven about that, for though Dan was certainly in danger he was further away from the slowly rising shape, and if an attack was made on us I was convinced it would choose me first.

There are convictions you cannot explain, that come upon you without warning and make disbelief impossible. I could not put from my mind the memory of how narrowly I had escaped destruction a short while previously. The horror had disappeared when I'd turned from the mantel with all of the flames beaten out. But just the fact that I'd failed to destroy the drawing I'd made of it could have brought it back again very quickly—if it was determined to keep my fear of it as alive as it had been from the first. And how could I doubt that it had always sought to do that, to keep me in a state of constant dread, to make its presence felt in every possible way until it decided that to let me go on living would be a mistake and the time had come to cut the thread?

For one brief moment I remained convinced that just such a time had come, that the decision had been made and that nothing could save me unless there was something about the horror that could keep it, at certain times, from slaying without the aid of a physical weapon.

I had good reason to think there was. But I could so easily have been mistaken that if the weapon I was clasping had crumbled to ashes in my hand and been blown away by the wind it could not have seemed more useless. An andiron could make a blazing logwood fire seem more walled-in and secure. *Seem,* no more, and as a weapon against a forest fire or a wolf's fangs, just its presence in my clasp had become so wild a mockery that I had just as wild an impulse to turn and hurl it into the underbrush.

There is a strange kind of human pride, when no chance of survival remains, that can make a man prefer to face death empty-handed.

I might have gone so far as to just stand there motionless, waiting for the worst to happen, if Dan had not called out to me in a voice that didn't sound in the least terrified.

"Come on, John—hurry! What are you staring at? You're the one now who's adding to the delay. It's been bad enough already—"

So he had seen nothing, and I had mistaken his stillness for something quite different. I started back across the road without knowing that the horror had vanished, because his words had made me remember something I'd let myself forget. If we both had to go, I had no right to let myself be struck down where I was standing when a few short steps would bring me to the car. He hadn't seen it, but I had, and death by violence is something no one should have to endure alone when there's a friend who can make it seem just a little less terrible. Two or three men facing a firing squad surely gain some support just from solidarity—not much, but it is better than being absolutely alone when the volley comes.

I didn't look back again until I got to the car. Then I turned, very slowly and deliberately, half-expecting to see that the shadow had crossed the road just as quickly and was no longer merely darkening the vegetation where I had been standing.

When I saw that it was no longer darkening the vegetation anywhere, but had totally vanished, I reached out and grasped the flung-open door opposite the driver's seat for support. Relief, when it is overwhelming, can bring about as violent a trembling as the starkest kind of fear. All I did for a moment was to tighten my hold on the door and let it swing almost shut and then open again.

Dan had switched on the ignition and was releasing the brakes when I climbed back into the car and tossed the andiron into the rear seat. I hoped I wouldn't have to use it again on a small animal, no matter how mercifully. If I had to use it on a much larger one I was quite sure that the blows I struck would be the opposite of merciful. He had hit Doris twice, Dan had said—twice on the head. If she was still endangered or had been seriously harmed when I caught up with him, I was quite sure my blows wouldn't stop after I'd raised and lowered the andiron just two or three times.

"If we can find the exact spot where he left the road," Dan said, almost as if he were aware of my thoughts. "And from that point he's left some slight trail which will enable us to tell in what general direction he'll be traveling, the time we've lost may not matter too much. But as we agreed—it's a tall order."

I said nothing in reply, because I agreed so completely that discussing it further would have served no useful purpose. We were very close to the second sharp turn in the road now, and in another moment we'd know more than we did. If he came into view when we passed beyond the turn I would, I knew, from that moment on be very intolerant of anyone who refused to believe in miracles. But I did not think that likely to happen.

CHAPTER TEN

We were about seventy feet beyond the second turn when a tall, lean man in a gray flannel shirt and baggy khaki trousers stepped out from the shadows at the edge of the road and prevented us from continuing on by planting himself directly in the path of the car, and waving his arms back and forth.

I stopped the car, got out, and walked to where he was standing.

"This is about where I thought the body would be," I said, almost sure I wasn't mistaken in assuming he was one of Brindley's men. "But it seems to have been taken away. Why did you stop us?"

He looked me up and down. "Just who are you?" he asked. "I was given orders to stop all cars or anything else that might pass this way. Brindley asked me to stay here and keep a sharp lookout until he sends someone to relieve me. That may not be before midnight."

"It makes sense," I said. "I'm the one who found Margrave early this morning. Didn't Brindley tell you? I've been a guest at the mansion for more than a week."

"And that other gentleman?" he asked.

"He's a guest too. Daniel Shields."

"No, he didn't tell me," the tall man said. "We just came in a car when he phoned and stayed around waiting until he got here. It was a long wait, because he was kept busy at the house. The body was taken away a half hour ago. He must be just about getting back to the village by now."

His hand shot out. "I'm Cliff Donaldson. Brindley deputized me. The two men who were just here with me didn't have to be deputized. We've got a four-man police force and they put in a seventeen-hour day. It sometimes runs to twenty."

I had met the other two at the mansion, but I didn't tell him there was a newly deputized member like himself who was lying dead in the living room with his throat torn out. He'd been left there to guard the house and Donaldson had been left alone on the road to guard the scene of another brutal slaying. There are things you don't call to the attention of a man with an exacting duty to perform.

I had only one question more to ask him, and I'd wasted precious seconds by not asking it sooner.

"Have you see anyone at all since the body was taken away? Anyone—or anything that struck you as unusual."

"Not unusual exactly," he said. "Just a crackling of branches quite far back along the road. I turned around and looked—walked out into the middle of the road, in fact—but I couldn't see anything, no shaking of the branches. But it was probably too distant. I imagine I wouldn't have heard it at all if it hadn't been so loud a sound, like someone thrashing around in the underbrush for half a minute."

"I'd call that unusual," I said.

He shook his head. "I wouldn't. I've hunted deer in these woods every autumn since I was a youngster. And deer don't have to wait for the open season to go crashing around in the underbrush. Just the fact that it's not the open season makes them less cautious. It could just as easily have been some other animal, a bear even. I usually see one, two or three times a year, and a body that's been lying stretched out on the road for several hours might make a hungry bear forget that he's supposed to be a rarely seen animal—even when there's nothing left to excite it but a death scent."

"A thrashing," I said. "Did it sound as if it was, well, the kind of twig-breaking sound a man might make if he was in a hurry to leave the road and plunge into the woods, carrying a heavy burden with him."

Donaldson looked at me steadily for a moment. "I don't know. I suppose it did, in a way. But it never crossed my mind that it could be a man lugging something with him. I was far from sure it was an animal, of course. That's why it gave me quite a start for a minute. I was posted here to keep alert, as I told you. And a sound—any sound—has to be taken seriously."

"Why didn't you walk back along the road to where it seemed to be coming from, then, and try to find out more about it?"

"Because I right away told myself it was the kind of sound I'd heard a hundred times in the forest. Every time I've walked through this stretch of woods I've heard cracklings of one sort or the other. It's no different anywhere. Besides, I was quite sure that when I'd got to where I'd heard the thrashing there would be nothing for me to see. It lasted for too short a time."

"You could have examined the spot. You might have found some footprints."

He continued to look at me steadily.

"We could still do that," he said. "You wouldn't have said what you did if you hadn't something in mind that wouldn't have occurred to me. It might help if you told me what makes you think someone on two legs went crashing through the underbrush dragging two big bags of potatoes with him."

"Something just as heavy," I said. "A woman—Margrave's daughter."

I told him everything, except that I still felt it might be just as well if I kept silent about what had happened to the deputy.

Dan had gotten out of the car and I turned for an instant to stare at him coming toward us, so that I missed seeing the way Donaldson must have looked right after I stopped talking. When I turned to face him again he had regained sufficient self-control to simply nod, with tight-lipped grimness.

"All right, let's go and have a look," he said. "I doubt if we'll find any footprints. It hasn't rained for a week, so the ground is dried out and there are no sodden leaves. If this storm keeps on rising we'll have good footprint-leaving weather tomorrow. Why is it so often that way? I'm glad I'm not Brindley, with no help from nature when footprints would be a godsend."

"This is the place we were going to pick to go into the woods on foot," Dan said, the moment he was at my side. "Either right here, or a little further on. What have you found out? Is it the right place, was the body—"

"The right place is back along the road a short distance," I said, cutting him short: "We passed it."

"I heard a loud thrashing back there," Donaldson volunteered. "The body was right here, but no one came as far as this."

"Brindley deputized Mr. Donaldson by a proxy swearing-in," I told Dan. "He's been alone here since the body was taken away, alert to every sound. We're going back to have a look at the place where he heard a loud crackling of twigs, perhaps a branch splintering. It was so loud it gave him a start. But he thought it was probably a deer."

"And he saw nothing?"

"That's right—nothing," Donaldson confirmed. "There was no stirring of the foliage as far as I could see from here."

"How far back do you think it was?"

"Probably seventy or eighty feet. We should have no trouble in locating the spot, even if there are no footprints. You can't go crashing through the underbrush without leaving some broken twigs scattered around."

Donaldson turned and started back along the road without saying anything more and we followed him. We passed the car in silence. He shook his head three or four times, and I had the feeling he was reproaching himself for not having traveled the same route right after he'd heard the crackling. But I could understand why he hadn't. Until I'd told him what had happened at the house, my near certainty as to what had caused it could hardly have been shared by a man whose thoughts had been on deers or bears.

Even now, I realized, I could have been mistaken in attaching so much importance to what he had heard. The thrashing sound could easily have been made by an animal, and if Doris had been carried into the woods at some other place in the road we'd have to return to the house and start over again to find the slightest clue as to where her abductor had taken her. If he'd left the road very soon after leaving the house and vanished between the trees we'd have a great deal of searching to do, and it might well prove futile. But still—I stopped when we came to the car to pick up the andiron from the back seat.

As we continued on, the foliage overhanging the road seemed to become more alive with the kind of stirrings that could make you feel that many small creatures of the night were aware of your presence, and moving about with an increasing restlessness. I don't know just why that should have increased my forebodings, but somehow it did. Perhaps because there is nothing alive in nature that fails to disturb human beings slightly when fright takes hold of it; even when it is as small a creature as a grasshopper leaping out of the grass to escape being crushed by the foot of a vast, towering shape beyond its comprehension.

I have often thought that all animal fear may be highly contagious and that when a fox is being pursued through the woods by horns and hounds, some of its terror communicates itself to the hunters. How could it be otherwise if, as mystic philosophers persist in believing, life is everywhere linked in some higher-dimensional continuity, from unicellular organisms to man, throughout the universe of stars? There were times when I refused to take such a possibility seriously, but there were other times when I came very close to believing it.

When we'd passed the vegetation where the road turned sharply, I realized that in the car I'd failed to see just how dense it had been at that point. My fear for Doris's safety had prevented me from giving it more than a glance. But now, approaching the second turn on foot, even the trees seemed more towering and set closer together.

The shadows which they cast across the road had a grotesquely distorted look, perhaps heightened by the swaying of the branches in the rising storm. It was almost as if the wind, which came in furious gusts, had lifted a dozen forest-dwelling gnomes with peaked caps on their heads from the forest aisles and flattened them out on the road, with such violence that they looked exactly like shadows until they picked themselves up.

Apparently, the sunlight had not been totally blotted out. Here and there, between rifts in the clouds, just enough radiance filtered down to make the casting of shadows possible.

But right at that moment the quickly forming and dissolving shadow-shapes that kept pace with us were vaguely disturbing to someone like myself, whose hold on reality was not as secure as I could have wished.

I kept telling myself, however, that it was secure enough, and that only one thing could have shattered it and made be believe that the shadows were not cast by the wind-lashed branches overhead.

If one of the shadows had assumed the outlines of a wolf's head with pointed ears I would, I knew, have come to an abrupt halt, letting Dan go on past me. And when he turned back to find out what had caused me to halt, there would have been a look in my eyes he would not have soon forgotten.

He had failed to see it before, when it had begun to take on form and substance where we had encountered the weasel, and it might be gone again just as quickly. But he would begin to have some serious doubts about my emotional stability, and that alone would have struck another blow at what little confidence he'd managed to retain.

When we'd left the house, despite what had happened, he had been much more in control of himself than he was now. I could tell just by the way his shoulders were jerking that the strain was beginning to tell on him.

I was just about to grip his arm, and say some small thing of no consequence in the hope that it might help to turn his thoughts in a less grim direction, when a shout from Donaldson brought us up short.

"You were right! Someone left the road right here, and went crashing through the underbrush. It couldn't have been a deer."

We hurried forward, and when we got to his side he was kneeling at the edge of the road with his shoulders lowered, supporting himself with one hand while he brushed some small, broken twigs aside to clear a wider space around whatever it was he was examining.

I didn't think it could be a footprint. But when I stared down over his shoulder, I saw that what we both had failed to consider was the way a slight layer of dust can collect, in the absence of rain, deep enough to make the impression left by a shoe stand out clearly. Apparently the wind had failed to carry all of the dust away. And even if the leaves just beyond were not sodden or the ground soft enough to leave a trail that we could have followed, we'd found something of tremendous importance. More than just one something, in fact, for without looking up at me Donaldson pointed to two more prints that were only a little less distinct.

Were there some smaller prints as well? I wondered with a desperate kind of uncertainty. If we looked painstakingly, right up to where the underbrush started, could we find them? I heard Dan draw in his breath sharply as I fell to my knees at Donaldson's side and stared down at the clear print for an instant before searching for smaller ones that, I suddenly realized, would have meant very little. He could just as easily have been still carrying Doris, and if her shoes had grazed the dust it would have provided no actual proof that she had regained consciousness.

To have found many prints, both large and small, would, in fact, have been alarming, for it would have suggested that a struggle had taken place, perhaps forcing him to strike her again, and I was relieved when Donaldson said: "No sign of a woman's prints anywhere. These three were made by a man wearing a rather small-sized shoe for a man—six or seven perhaps. Small feet don't always go with small men, but they usually do. I'm sure he couldn't have been a giant."

"He was a small man," I said. "I thought I told you that."

"You didn't describe him. You just said Mr. Shields ran into him on the stairs when he was carrying her and there was a struggle. You'd sure make the defense happy if you were going over it at a trial, under oath," he added wryly. "What you forget to remember can be pretty vital."

At any other time, the remark would have angered me. But because of the strain we were both under I found that forgiving him required no effort. You can pick a man at random out of an entire village, deputize him to uphold the law, and if in private life he's someone quite different from a sheriff, he'll still start thinking and talking as if he'd won his badge at an election. It didn't matter at the moment, but I would have been happier if he had been a little less like Brindley.

You're better off if there's nothing remotely resembling a legal mind accompanying you when you're own mind is set on just one thing—to forget there's such a thing as a courtroom, and set to work with an andiron the instant you catch sight of a snake walking about on two legs with its coils looped around someone you've come a long distance to save.

Would he carry her a long distance? I wondered a little wildly—or a very short one? If we could trail him at all by the foliage he'd torn aside, and the deep indentations in the fallen leaves, just how far would we have to continue on to overtake him? Even if we could move faster than he could hope to move? He was burdened and we were not, which meant that we would be certain to catch up with him if he moved in just one direction. But we couldn't be sure that he wouldn't change his direction a half-dozen times, particularly if he became aware that he was being pursued.

Donaldson got to his feet an instant after I did, and nodded toward the foliage at the edge of the road. "He's made quite a rent there," he said. "Two branches cracked and dangling, and some shredded-away leaves. But don't count on his leaving any kind of a trail. Ground's as hard as a rock, where it isn't covered with dry leaves. We'll see."

"Why are there so many leaves?" Dan asked. "Autumn's several weeks away."

"It wasn't last year and the year before," Donaldson told him. "Those leaves have been piling up for two or three years at least. But there are plenty of live plants growing up between them, as you can see. Fungus growths are sometimes a great help. There are a lot of patches scattered about—big mushrooms every twenty or thirty feet. They can break and scatter underfoot like loaves of bread. Come on—we'll see."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Donaldson had been right in a general way. There were no trampled-upon mushrooms for a considerable distance, but the ground underfoot had just enough of a torn-up look to enable us to be sure that the man, who had left the road to go plunging into the woods, had continued on in the same direction. There were some upturned fragments of moss and earthmold scattered about, and, about ten feet from the road, another broken, small branch.

Donaldson paused for an instant to reach out and twist it until it broke free, the way a man will sometimes do to relieve tension, even though it made no sense. He went on holding it in his hand and swishing it about like a whip. It was too small to be used as a magical staff, which might have helped us by rising up and pointing like a hazel-stick divining rod every time the trail ceased to be easy to follow. Besides, the slender sapling from which he had wrenched it happened to be a birch.

It occurred to me also that what Donaldson had said about deers had probably caused many parts of the forest to look exactly like the trail we were following. But that didn't trouble me much, because there could be little doubt that the man who had just left the road with his footprints in the dust had made the one we were following.

We came to a fungus growth before we'd gone more than forty or fifty feet, but it wasn't a big mushroom underfoot. It was a foot-wide, ridgelike growth, rust-red in hue, projecting from the base of an enormous oak. It had been shredded all down one side and there were fragments scattered about on the ground that looked like blobs of bleeding flesh.

It was nothing but a wild kind of coincidence, of course. Nature can play cruel tricks on the mind at times. But reminding myself how common such coincidences are couldn't keep a coldness from creeping up over the base of my neck.

"We've been lucky so far," Dan said, stopping for an instant to poke at one of the fragments with his foot. He was clearly unaware of the shock it had given me, or he would not have spoken as he did. But I said nothing in reply, just turned and went on as if I couldn't have agreed with him more.

We *had* been lucky, in a way, for the man we were pursuing had seemingly been in so great a haste to beat his way through the woods that he had collided with more than one vegetable growth that could be easily ripped. Some loosened bark had been stripped completely from another tree, further on, and there were a number of vines and creepers dangling free that I was sure had been interlaced before he'd torn them apart to clear a path for himself.

Had he stopped from time to time to set Doris down and pick her up again before continuing on? He would, I felt, have been compelled to do that if the vegetation had become very dense directly in his path. For he would have had to use both of his hands.

A vision of Doris lying slumped on the ground, still unconscious, and perhaps seriously injured—how could I know how savagely he had struck her on the stairs?—flashed across my mind. But I refused to let myself dwell on it for more than an instant. I began to think, instead, of what I would do to him if once I got a firm enough grip on him to bend him slowly backward, with the andiron just as firmly in my clasp.

Slowly and relentlessly backward, until his head was in just the right position for it to be more than a glancing blow.

We came upon the cave before we'd gone more than two hundred feet from the road. It was difficult for me to believe that he could have fled to any place of concealment so near, for it could have provided sanctuary only if someone in pursuit of him hadn't the least idea where he'd left the road. We might not have known, of course, and only a lucky accident had enabled us to trail him as we had. But still, the thought that he might well be pursued before long by a quickly assembled searching party, led by the sheriff, could hardly have been absent from his mind.

Just that likelihood alone suggested that, if he *had* taken Doris to the cave, he did not intend to remain hidden there for long. Even that might have been hard for me to believe, if the trail we'd been following hadn't come to so abrupt a termination almost directly in front of the cave.

It was surrounded by a clearing on three sides, as caves so often are when they have been visited frequently enough for much of the vegetation to have been cleared away. It was not very wide, and would have meant nothing in itself if the trail had continued on beyond it. But when we made a careful examination of the underbrush, and the foliage at waist-level that dangled from the boughs overhead, we found an abundance of interlacing vines and an undisturbed underfoot growth from that point on.

The trail had brought us to an uncertain halt more than once before, because there had been times when it had seemed momentarily to vanish. But always before, a short distance further on, we had found some unmistakable indication that we had been preceded through the woods by a man whose only thought had been to clear a path for himself as quickly as possible.

Once Donaldson had even found, not fifty feet from the cave, what looked very much like a footprint, not too sharply defined. But it was on a patch of bare earth so hard that it would have strained credulity to believe that even a giant, wearing steel-soled shoes, could have left such an indentation to mark his passing. And it was a print of the same size as the ones in the dust at the edge of the road.

Donaldson waited until we'd spent two or three minutes, making sure that the trail could not possibly have continued on through the dense barrier of greenery ahead, before he spoke with a decisiveness that startled me a little, because—though I hadn't questioned his ability to be decisive when he felt it had some support—he had seemed just a little irresolute on the road. I was sure that accepting his leadership would have pleased him. But although I had no intention of doing that, just the fact that, as a native, his knowledge of the forest would probably include some familiarity with many—perhaps all—of its caves made me decide I'd go along with whatever he might suggest, provided it made sense. Separating sound from shaky and over-reckless advice isn't as difficult, I've always felt, as most people seem to think, even when you have to do it fast.

"We don't know whether he's armed or not," Donaldson said. "If he has a gun—"

"He wasn't carrying one when he attacked me on the stairs," Dan said quickly. "I'm absolutely sure of that."

"How could you have been sure?" Donaldson snapped just as quickly. "Simply because he wasn't wearing it in a holster on his hip?" He tapped his own holstered gun as he spoke. "You don't always draw a gun when you feel it's just as easy to knock a man down with your fists. And if he was strong as you've said—"

He seemed to regret his quick impatience, for he shook his head. "All right. The fact that he didn't warn you not to interfere by whipping out a gun probably means he wasn't armed *then*. But he could be armed now. He could have an arsenal in that cave. That means we've got to be very careful not to pass into a beam of light when we go in after him. If he has a flashlight and trains it on us we've got to leap back fast. I'll go in first and I won't be making use of my flash—not unless I have no choice. He probably knows we're here, but we can't be sure of that."

"I don't see how he could not know," I said. "He'd have to be ten different kinds of a fool if he failed to remain alert to the possibility that he might be trailed at any time

—even if he wasn't counting on so immediate a pursuit."

The cave was no different from the usual run of rock structures: opening on a yawning, jagged square or triangle of darkness, such as you'll seldom fail to encounter if you spend an entire day wandering through a stretch of forest that extends for several miles in all directions. Quite possibly, there are some American woodlands that contain no natural caves at all, but I've never had occasion to roam through one, either in the East, or on the West Coast.

Always I've found at least one cave and frequently four or five. I've often found myself wondering how many caves a Government forester would have to locate and explore in a really vast expanse of virgin wilderness to feel that he was as familiar with the forest as he was with the lines on his palm. Probably thousands and the task might well take years.

Had Donaldson ever explored the cave facing us before? I was almost sure he had, but I had put off asking him because I was convinced he would lie about it if he hadn't. He was that kind of a man. It wasn't to his discredit, actually. He just needed to have people think him knowledgeable in order to act decisively in a given situation. I was a little that way myself at times, and he'd offered to lead the way inside, hadn't he? That convinced me that he was a man of courage who could readily be forgiven a small human frailty.

"Don't misunderstand me," Donaldson was saying. "I'm not claiming he doesn't know we're here. Maybe he does. He could be standing no more than three or four feet inside the cave right at this moment, watching every move we make, and waiting to blast us down the instant we move past him in the darkness. He could swing around and catch us in the beam of a flashlight and start shooting. But if he's deep in the cave, occupied with something else, he may not know we're here. It's a chance we've got to take."

"It seems just a little too suicidal for me," Dan said.

"Why couldn't you give us your gun and let John and me stand guard here until you come back with the sheriff and a half-dozen men?"

"I could do that, yes. But when I got back here with Brindley I could find you both riddled with bullets. You don't put off something like this. We've trailed him here and it's three against one, even if he's armed. I have a gun, and an andiron that massive isn't exactly a toy weapon."

"I still say it would be suicidal," Dan said. "Distinctly on the crazy side."

"No, Donaldson's right," I agreed. "Doris doesn't—can't—mean as much to you as she does to me. Don't misunderstand me, Dan, please. She isn't Helen—she isn't your wife, and she'd have to be to make you understand why I feel that he's right. Look at it this way. If he had an arsenal inside, as Donaldson said—if he had a submachine gun or anything like that, he'd have blasted us down before this. He'd have come straight out of that cave blasting away. He wouldn't have to crouch in shadows or flatten himself against the wall waiting for us to pass him. He'd have come out shooting. You can cut three men down almost as fast with a lightweight automatic gun as you can one.

"We'd have been dead before Donaldson could reach for his pistol. And consider this. The chances are against his being armed at all, if he didn't draw a gun when you struggled with him on the stairs."

I swung about to look at Donaldson again. "Isn't that so?" I demanded. "Isn't that what you really believe, despite what you said a moment ago? You wanted to make us stay alert and on guard. But isn't that what you think is probably true?"

"Yes, I guess it is," Donaldson conceded. "But it would be a great mistake to count on his being unarmed."

"No one has said anything about counting on it," I reminded him. "But if he's unarmed he won't stand a chance of staying alive ten seconds after he makes the mistake of leaping out at us. Just keep that pistol in readiness, please. That's all I ask. I'm going in first. That's the only change I'm making in your plan."

Donaldson shrugged. "If it means all that to you," he said. "I guess it would to me, if I was a married man. When you've only yourself to be concerned about, you don't get torn apart that way. It's one advantage of staying single. There are others I could mention."

"Damn few others," Dan said. "Miss Margrave isn't his wife yet. But she will be."

"That's something else he forgot to tell me," Donaldson said. "Everyone in the village calls her 'Miss Margrave'. But bringing up how a man would feel with his wife in danger made me think it must have just happened."

"It will happen," I said. "But I may have to commit a justifiable homicide first. That's why it might be much better if you put six bullets in him. A deputy sheriff doesn't have to do so much explaining afterward."

"I won't unless I have to," Donaldson said. "He's entitled to his day in court, no matter what he's done. But I wouldn't worry about that too much if I were you. I may have to.

"It might be better," he added. "If we stayed about four feet apart. There may not be the faintest glimmer of light when once we're well inside the entrance and we'll have to advance very slowly and cautiously. Come to halt and listen if you feel you've made any sound at all, however slight. And if you hear any sound stay just as alert. Stop for a moment and listen. I'll switch on the flash when we've advanced as far as we can without giving ourselves away. We may get almost to the end of the cave before he becomes aware that we've come calling. If I played the flashlight around just inside the entrance we'd make ourselves more of a target."

I wasn't sure Brindley would have proceeded in that way, and I didn't think he was either. How good an idea was it to make a surprise raid on a dangerous character in total darkness? How much of an advantage, actually, could we hope to gain by it? Might we not be placing ourselves at a disadvantage if we found ourselves playing a game of blind-man's buff at the end of the cave and we were greeted by a burst of gunfire close to the entrance the instant it became flooded with light?

The risk, I felt, would probably be about the same, either way. But if Donaldson was just improvising, and knew no more than I did about how an experienced police officer would have gone about it, we still had little to lose by trying to find out as much as we could before he switched on the flash. If we were deep in the cave we'd perhaps have just a little better chance of maneuvering if the bullets started flying, and we had to leap back or flatten ourselves or plunge into shadows fast.

It suddenly occurred to me that we'd been taking a dangerous risk by just standing there discussing it. We had moved quite far to the side of the cave and were no longer facing the entrance. But what I'd said, about how easy it would have been for him to cut us down if he was armed with a machine gun, would be just as true if he'd stood right inside the entrance and opened fire with a pistol. We'd turned our backs a half-dozen times on that yawning square of darkness, and Donaldson's gun was still on his hip.

He drew it now, however, as if the same thought had belatedly occurred to him, and we moved up closer to the cave and edged along it in single file until we came to the entrance. I looked back to make sure he realized I didn't intend to just remain there meditating, and he caught my eye and nodded. I moved quickly forward into the cave.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There was just enough light at the entrance to see the cave walls on both sides of us for a distance of perhaps ten feet. Then they fell away into total darkness. From outside, the darkness had looked different, so deep and impenetrable it had resembled a curtain of heavy black crepe draped across the entire opening.

I heard no sound at all as I continued to move forward, treading very stealthily on what felt more like a surface of sand or gravel than hard-packed earth. My shoes seemed to sink into it a little, but there was no crunching sound.

I stopped after a moment and listened. Still no sound, no slightest stir of movement—which meant that Donaldson and Dan must have halted also in a kind of instinctive awareness that I was no longer in motion. They could hardly have been moving without making a faint swishing sound that would have been audible—to me at least.

I was just about to move forward again when I heard a sudden crunch of footsteps a few feet behind me, which might have startled me less if my own footsteps had not been so silent. Why should Dan or Donaldson have so completely abandoned all caution when they had previously moved just as silently, over soil softer and more sound-cushioning than I had expected to find inside the cave? How could they have failed to realize that a single, too-heavy step could be as disastrous as a dozen? That if they had gone stumbling forward with a clatter it could hardly have imperiled us more?

For an instant, it did not even occur to me, because it is sometimes hard to think of more than one possibility at a time, that the sound might have been made by someone else. Bewilderment and shock made me experience something close to anger, and it was directed wholly at Dan and Donaldson. It was a carelessness that I felt was inexcusable, and very hard to forgive.

But it had happened and could not be undone, and unless it was quickly followed by other, even more alarming, sounds there was nothing to be gained by waiting to find out. If we'd given our presence away we'd know before long, and continuing on would be no more dangerous than just standing still and straining our eyes and ears in the darkness.

Just the fact that we could hear, but could not see, made, I felt, very little difference. But I no longer felt that way the instant I heard the harsh outcry.

It was a stricken cry—sudden, terrible, and prolonged. It was not a scream, but no scream could have appalled me more, for there is an extremity of terror and physical pain that the human voice never fails to record, whether frenziedly high-pitched or harsh and deep-throated.

It was followed by a heavy thud and the sounds of a struggle that was even more prolonged. There was a thumping and a thrashing, as if the most furious kind of resistance was being overcome in a violently relentless way. Was it Dan or Donaldson who had cried out and been dragged to the ground?

It had to be one or the other, for it was not a woman's voice I had heard.

Suddenly, the sounds stopped and the cave became silent again. But just before that happened something clattered to the ground with a sharp, metallic sound.

The silence lasted for only a moment. Someone was dragging himself toward me across the ground, his breathing so harsh that it seemed as if it might well be coming from a severely wounded or even a dying man.

All at once the cave became flooded with light. A wide beam of radiance bored through the darkness and made so bright a glare that almost all of the shadows were dispelled beyond and around it, bringing both the walls and the roof into clear view.

Dan was crawling toward me across the ground with his shoulders jerking, his breath coming now in choking gasps. His clothes were even more torn than they had been after his struggle on the stairs. There had been five or six rents before, but now his shirt, which had just been ripped down the front, was completely torn away. Another bruise had been added to the one on his temple, just above his jaw, and a thin ribbon of blood was trickling from his mouth.

He was holding the flashlight in his right hand—with incredible steadiness considering the state he was in—and shaking his head as if to clear it.

I was almost sure it was Donaldson's flashlight, if only because he'd had one, and the brilliance of the beam was well in accord with the kind of flash a man like Donaldson might reasonably be expected to carry. It was quite small, despite its brilliance, and had not even made a bulge on his hip. He'd promised to flash it on when he felt the right time had come, and that time was certainly now. But he was nowhere in sight. Dan had seemingly picked it up, when it had clattered to the ground, by fumbling around until he found it.

All of that flashed across my mind as I bent to help Dan to his feet—and other things as well, questions I desperately wanted to ask. But Dan gave me no time to ask them.

He answered them instead, without waiting for me to question him.

"It was Donaldson who cried out—not me. I was just—struck on the chest, and slammed back against a rock." He gestured back along the cave wall. "That big, projecting one over there. Knocked all the breath from my lungs, bruised me some, too. But I'm all right, I think. No broken bones."

"You probably are," I said. "Just walk around a little, bend and unbend your arms. That's the best way of finding out."

"Don't need to," he said. "I'm okay, I can tell. It's Donaldson who must have been badly hurt. We'd better face it. He may be dead—"

"I know," I said.

I couldn't say anything more, because I could see all the way to the back of the cave. What I saw made me snatch the flashlight from Dan's hand; he wasn't holding it quite steady enough now to enable me to make out whether Doris was sitting up or slumped back against the cave wall. I could just make out her slender form as the beam wavered back and forth over her, and the uneven surface of rock at her back. She seemed to be sitting up straight, but I couldn't be sure.

It took me a moment to make sure. I reached her side in eight or ten long strides and was bending over her with the flashlight still in my hand, taking care not to shine it directly on her face, before I heard Dan call out: "If she's all right, come back here fast. We've got to keep that flash trained in the other direction."

His warning made sense, but it meant nothing to me at the moment. Doris meant everything. She was shaking her head and looking straight at me, and although she was deathly pale and trembling violently there was no bruise on her temple, as I'd feared there might be.

She couldn't speak, because she was both bound and gagged. Her mouth was covered with a two-inch strip of adhesive tape and a double length of cord had been used to bind her arms to her sides. Her legs had not been bound, as if, to a man capable of the utmost brutality, there had seemed no need to guard against an escape attempt which could not hope to succeed. If he had bound her arms and taped her mouth, it had probably been solely to keep her quiet and avoid unnecessary bother.

The instant I got the tape off she started to speak, but I urged her to remain silent for a moment longer. "Just let me free you first, darling," I whispered. "He's bound you, as I might have known he would, if he tied you up at all. He couldn't have drawn the cords tighter."

"They're cutting into my arms a little," she breathed, ignoring what I'd said. "But it's all right. It hasn't been too painful."

"Never mind, just stay quiet. I'll have them off in a minute."

I couldn't get the knots loosened as quickly as I could have wished. It took me almost as long as it had to untangle the dangling strips of leather on Helen's legs when I'd sat beside her at the pool with the wolfhead firmly in my grasp. But at least the cord was a quite ordinary binding, and did not possess what had seemed, for a moment, to be a terrifying kind of aliveness when I'd struggled with the strips which had made Helen just as much of a captive.

The instant the cords fell away, Doris startled me by gripping my wrist and gesturing toward the front of the cave, as if she had grasped the importance of Dan's warning, and it was of more immediate concern to her than reliving an experience that must have been shattering. She would do that soon enough, I knew, for unless she told me exactly what had happened after she'd been carried from the house unconscious I would remain torn with anxiety and she would certainly want to spare me a long period of uncertainty. But now she seemed to share Dan's fear that, unless I kept the flashlight trained on the mouth of the cave, we wouldn't know if we had ceased to be in danger from her abductor's very quick, unobserved return.

"Dan couldn't have been the only one he attacked," she said, her voice taut with apprehension. "I couldn't see anything until he switched on that flashlight. But one man couldn't have fallen with a crash, and instantly started struggling furiously a few feet away. The sounds came from both sides of the cave."

"There was someone else," I said. "He was dragged outside and we don't know whether he's dead or alive."

"Was it Brindley?"

"No," I told her. "It was one of his men we picked up on the road on our way here. He helped us find you. He had a gun, but that's gone, too, now."

I had set the flashlight down on a slanting rock projection before I'd knelt to untie her. It was casting a bright enough beam to dispel almost all of the shadows, but when I saw Dan's shadow fall on the sandy soil directly in front of me I picked it up, swung about, and handed it to him.

"Get back to the entrance," I said. "Keep the front of the cave as brightly lighted as it is right here. We won't be left in total darkness, and I want to talk to Doris for another minute or two."

He remained standing very still for a moment, staring down at Doris with a look of overwhelming relief in his eyes. "Are you all right?" he asked. "He struck you twice before you went limp. I tried my best to stop him, but I came close to blacking out myself. He stunned me with a blow to the temple, ripped my shirt, and raked my chest with his nails. He has the strength of a maniac, whether he is one or not."

"I don't think he is," Doris said. "He hasn't acted like one."

"You better tell John as much as you possibly can before he returns—if he does. I'm afraid he will. We've got two heavy andirons we grabbed up from the fireplace in John's room, before we left the house in my car. But they're a poor substitute for a bullet from a gun."

He turned and started back toward the mouth of the cave, pausing just once when I called after him. "Stand just inside the entrance and if he comes in try to split his skull. Strike hard and strike fast, before his eyes can adjust to the glare."

He nodded and continued on, and the light dwindled around us as the flashlight receded.

As soon as we were alone, I bent and kissed Doris before she could speak again, wishing I'd done that sooner. Our lips remained joined for a moment and her arms went around my shoulders. She shivered and clung to me, while I ran my fingers through the dark wilderness of her hair, and rained more kisses on her cheeks and throat and eyes.

Then she let go of me, and I held her a little away from me with a firm grip on her shoulders and asked: "Just what did you mean when you said he didn't act like a maniac? I never really thought he was, despite what Saunders said. And what you told me about him. Or wasn't he the same man who called two days ago to threaten your father in a peculiarly vicious way?"

"He was the same man," she said. "But I didn't know that until I regained consciousness right here in this cave about half an hour ago. When he came into my room—you'd been gone for about an hour—he was wearing a hood over his head. It was very oddly shaped. There were keyholes cut in it, and two high bulges in the cloth on both sides of his head. You've seen Easter bunny masks, or headpieces. That's what it made me think of at first—two big rabbit ears standing straight up. Then I realized the earlike bulges had more the very sharp, pointed look that a wolf's ears would have—or the ears of a fox."

The chill came a moment *after* she'd mentioned what he'd been wearing on his head. For an instant, the Easter-rabbit image her words had conjured up had struck me as ludicrous, an incredibly incongruous kind of disguise for an abductor to wear who didn't want to be recognized. And even when she'd spoken of changing her mind about the shape of the ears the rabbit image had carried over—no, it hadn't actually, but another mental picture just as childish and absurd had taken its place.

If his intent had been to keep her from putting up much of a struggle by a sight that would instantly paralyze her with fright would he have chosen so unlikely a disguise? Doris was not a naive child. She knew enough about everything that had taken place in the house to have realized instantly that an attempt to frighten her in that way would have been too obvious and crude to be taken seriously. If someone came into a room with a headpiece bulge that turned her thoughts in the direction of wolves, it would have to be made convincing in some other, more subtle, and psychologically adroit way as well. The shape of the headpiece alone would have had exactly the opposite effect. Although the sudden appearance of an intruder in her room, disguised or otherwise, would have been frightening enough, it would have been the worst possible way of attempting to heighten her fright.

What chilled me was something else. It had an obvious aspect, too, which helped to explain why it had occurred to me so quickly. But there was nothing deliberately crude about it. What if the shape of the headpiece was *something he couldn't help?*

He could have altered its shape by padding it out. But what if the change had occurred too quickly to enable him to do that? What if he'd made it out of something else, such as a scarf, and had been forced to snatch it up too quickly to concern himself with the bulging ears that would have appeared in any loose garment he threw over his head to serve as a hood? The eyeholes he could have made very swiftly by slashing the cloth with his fingernails. And if subduing her by resorting to terror and shock had not seemed in the least necessary—subduing her would have been very easy for a man of his strength—might he not have cloaked his head solely to keep her from seeing what had happened to it?

My sudden silence made Doris pause for a moment to stare at me with what I was sure could only have been puzzlement, though the light wasn't bright enough now for me to see the look in her eyes.

"What is it, John?" she asked, when my silence became more prolonged. "It's not at all surprising he was wearing a disguise. I couldn't understand why it wasn't just a simple mask, but I didn't give that much of a thought. I took it for granted that if he wasn't going to kill me right then and there he wouldn't want me to be able to identify him later on."

"Yes, that's true," I said. "I just wanted to be sure I had it all clear in my mind. You must have been a little uncertain for a moment as to exactly what his intentions were? Did he say anything at all?"

She shook her head. "Not a word. He just came straight toward me across the room and gripped me about the waist—and slapped his hand over my mouth to keep me from screaming. Then he lifted me up, and carried me out of the room. It was hard to believe so small a man could have been so strong. I struggled and kicked, but it did no good. He carried me along the hall, and I thought of you. You were so near, and if only I could have screamed for help—"

"Dan and I together might have stopped him," I said. "But I'm far from sure of that. Dan said he seemed to have the strength of ten men."

I couldn't remember exactly what Dan had said, except that I felt I might have made an understatement. He had compared him to something that had come at him as nothing human could have done, with a terrible kind of forcefulness that had whirled him about and hurled him to the stairs.

"When did he encounter Dan?" I asked.

"Before he was much more than halfway down the stairs. Dan swung about and started struggling with him. I didn't know whether Dan had just started up the stairs or was descending. He was just standing there, with his shoulders jerking, when I caught sight of him. I can't tell you much about what happened right after that. I knew they were struggling, that Dan had grabbed him by the arm. I heard Dan shouting to him to set me down. But then something seemed to take the whole back of my head off, and I blacked out."

I told her, as briefly as I could, what had happened afterward, starting with Dan's arrival in my room in a state of near collapse and our taking off in Dan's car and ending with our arrival at the cave, accompanied by Donaldson. But I didn't tell her that the man Brindley had left stationed downstairs to guard the house was now lying slain at the foot of the stairs, or about the shadow that Dan had been mercifully spared the sight of when it had fallen across the shrubbery at the edge of the road.

I had to keep it brief, because I was beginning to regret I hadn't just kissed her and held her tightly for a moment, and joined Dan almost immediately where he was now standing, holding the flashlight so that just a little of the glow filtered back to us. And there were one or two more things I had to know.

I had felt that it was of the utmost importance—and Dan had agreed with me—that it would have been a mistake not to have waited for her to tell me everything she possibly could about the man who had carried her to the cave before we saw him again, as I was almost sure we would.

There was one thing I wanted to ask Dan about that was so difficult for me to understand that my impatience to hear what he would say almost got out of hand. I was seriously tempted to get up, give Doris's shoulder a reassuring squeeze, and tell her that I would be right back. It wouldn't take Dan more than ten seconds to tell me something I had to know before what had happened on the stairs made complete sense to me.

How could Dan have struggled with a man wearing a hood that completely concealed his features and failed to so much as mention it? The attack itself could hardly have seemed of greater importance, for a figure who is wearing a disguise has provided himself with an identity that is cloaked in mystery. Why hadn't Dan been so struck by that fact alone that even the man's abnormal strength would have seemed of lesser significance?

I forced myself to restrain my impatience. It would be much better, when I joined him at the entrance of the cave, if there was nothing else I was uncertain about. Then there would be only that one puzzling thing to clear up. We could give our undivided attention to a danger that we could not hope to overcome unless we did a great deal of thinking and planning.

There was something Doris still hadn't told me. Why had she become so convinced, when she had seen him without the hood, that his behavior had not seemed like that of a madman? Not just because he'd taken the precaution of tying her up, surely. Madmen were very good at taking such precautions. It had to be because of something he'd said or done that had seemed well thought-out and very logically motivated. She would have been on unsure ground even there, for a mentally unbalanced man or woman can often reason with precision and clarity and wear the mask of sanity. But if he had succeeded in making her say what she had when Dan had questioned her about it, there was a fairly strong possibility that she hadn't been mistaken.

"Just what happened after you regained consciousness?" I asked. "Did he tie you up before or afterward?"

"Before," she said. "I was securely bound when I came to, and that made everything more terrifying. When you can't move at all and there are cords cutting into your arms—"

"You don't have to tell me," I said. "Just not knowing where you were would have been bad enough."

"But I did know, almost immediately. There was no confusion in my mind at all and it's pretty hard to mistake the interior of a cave for a room with furnishings. Even if there had been no light the damp earth odors would have made me feel walled-in, and—well, imprisoned somewhere deep underground. But there was a portable electric lamp standing on the ground a few feet away, and the walls couldn't have been brighter if they had been flooded with sunlight."

"It isn't here now," I said. "I might have known he'd take it with him."

"It was much brighter than an ordinary, small flashlight," she said. "So bright it almost blinded me for an instant. Then I saw him standing there looking down at me. The hood was gone, so of course I recognized him, and knew he was the same man who had called on father two days ago. But he looked different now, much calmer. In fact, I can't recall ever having seen anyone who looked calmer. When someone just stands quietly staring at you in a keenly intelligent way right after he's struck you on the head and dragged or carried you a long distance—I felt somehow it hadn't been a short distance—you'd expect him to display some emotion. Oh, I suppose you could say that interest is an emotion. But what I mean is—"

"I think I know what you mean," I said. "But didn't such a complete lack of strong emotion make you feel there almost had to be something abnormal about his behavior?"

"It did, after a moment. But all I could think of when I first saw him standing there with the light at his back was how completely helpless I'd become. Just the fact that his face wasn't distorted with rage, as it had been the last time I'd seen him, didn't mean he wasn't going to kill me. I couldn't have been more completely at his mercy."

"But if what you just told Dan was true, that you didn't think he could be insane, he must have done or said something that made you feel that way."

"It wasn't anything he did. It was what he said. He sat down and talked for a long while. And he told me many things I hadn't known—about dad and you and the caves you explored together in Bulgaria, sometimes together and sometimes alone. He knew a great deal about you, John. But he didn't tell me exactly what it was he knew, and where you'd met him for the first and only time."

There was no reason for me to be startled by what she had said. If the man who called himself Ruschna had know Margrave well enough for his visit to have come as a shock, he must have known that I had been her father's co-worker and closest friend. Why should he not have known a great deal about me as well, particularly since his presence in the region where we had made frequent visits to the caves would have enabled him to observe our daily activities without our knowledge?

But somehow it did startle me, perhaps because you can be subconsciously aware of something for a long time and go right on telling yourself that it's too elusive and ill-defined to take seriously.

It just hadn't occurred to me that what had caused Margrave to stand at the door of his study in a state of near collapse, when the man had walked on down the hall and left the house, might have affected me in much the same way if my own involvement had been just as great. And perhaps it was. How could I be sure?

"He talked about dad and you in a very calm, completely reasonable way for ten or fifteen minutes," Doris was saying. "He knew exactly how much you had accomplished, and praised the learned scholar he said was very evident on every page of the books you've written, particularly the ones you wrote in collaboration with dad.

"He said it was dad, not you, who had found something that only he had a right to possess, because it had always belonged to him."

Doris paused an instant, then said: "It was just the way he might have talked as if I were sitting in a chair quietly listening—not bound and helpless and with my heart hammering in my throat. I don't know how he could have expected me to listen and not start screaming. He must have known how terrified I was."

"I'm sure he did," I said. "He was talking that way deliberately, I think."

"Yes, I know that now. I didn't think so at first, but you're right. He was going to tell me something he knew would come as more of a shock—the cruelest kind of shock—if he made me feel first that he might just possibly set me free. If he gave me just some small shred of hope to cling to. I mean—the feeling that he was inwardly tormented in some strange way and hadn't really wanted to go as far as he had."

"A totally vicious man will sometimes talk like that," I agreed. "It's how a cat will play with a mouse with an instinctive kind of cruelty, terrifying it but not hurting it at all at first. What did he say when he dropped the pretense?"

"He said he was sure dad had lied about being unable to find the artifact, because you don't trust anything so valuable to a European shipping clerk. He was sure it hadn't been lost at all, that dad had hidden it somewhere. And he is absolutely certain that you know where it is. He thinks dad must have told you. He thinks I may know, too, but he is more doubtful about that. He didn't come right out and say so, but I could tell he didn't believe dad would have been so likely to discuss it with me. An archeological find would be of much greater interest to you. If it was all that important he would have shown it to you the instant he unearthed it."

"But he didn't," I said. "It seems incredible to me, but he never said a word about it."

"That's just it. It would seem just as incredible to him. He doesn't believe you don't know where it is. And he said that if you kept it a secret from him you'd never see me alive again."

I reached out, fingers groping, found her hand and held it very tightly for a moment.

"Just remember one thing," I said. "This is the second time he's guessed wrong. The house didn't burn down as he said it would. And we're both going to stay alive and we'll be seeing each other very often for more years than we can count."

She didn't say anything in reply, just returned the firm pressure of my hand.

I got up.

"I was afraid for a moment he might have slipped back inside before Dan could get back to the entrance with the flash. But there's no part of the cave that's in darkness now, so we can be sure he's still outside. We've got to talk over what it will be best to do. The longer we stay here the more danger we'll be in. But we can only get word to Brindley in one way. Either Dan or I will have to try to get back to the road on foot. Dan's car is standing just around the second turn. At least, that's where we left it. It may not be there now."

"But if he's outside with a gun—"

I had no intention of telling her that it wasn't a gun that would make the risk perhaps greater than it would be if we just stayed in the cave and gave up all thought of going outside. If the shadow came back, the cave would provide no protection—but neither would the surrounding woods or any part of the road.

I experienced a sudden need to talk it over with Dan before I let myself think about it for ten seconds longer. And there was still the question that he might or might not be able to answer, but I knew I would have to ask. How could he possibly have struggled with a hooded figure on the stairs and mistaken him for a bare-headed man?

Doris grasped my sleeve just as I started to turn. "You said either Dan or you might have to at least try to get to the road. But if you decide it's a risk you'll have to take—can't it be Dan? It's selfish of me, I suppose, to feel that it will seem much worse than it is right now if I'm tormented every minute by the thought of what might happen to you. But Helen must be half out of her mind with worry by now, and Dan must be just as worried about her. Maybe he'll want to go."

"I'll have to see how he feels about it," I told her. "How we both feel, after we've discussed it."

"All right. But you don't have to feel as if you've just drawn the unlucky straw. There doesn't have to be any straws. There shouldn't be—when two men like you and Dan have something like that to settle. Just tell him what you feel makes the most sense. If I know Dan—he'll agree with you."

"We'll see," I said. "Don't get up. Stay right here. This is the safest part of the cave. It won't take us long to decide."

She didn't let go of my sleeve. "Darling, why can't I go, too? Then there would be no decision to make. If all three of us went—"

"No," I said. "It would be a great deal more dangerous than staying here. A man can run very swiftly, dodge in and out of the shadows, have a good chance of getting to Dan's car—even if he's right outside with a gun. If he's right outside, waiting for me or Dan to emerge, perhaps you couldn't call it a good chance. But it would still be better than a one-third chance and we don't know he's right outside. He may not be, which brings it back up to a good chance again. But it would be a much slimmer one for you."

She let go of my sleeve then, and I crossed the cave to where Dan was standing. He was holding the flashlight in his left hand, and had armed himself with his andiron again. He had set mine down on the ground a few feet from the entrance, but well off to one side.

I picked it up, gripping it as firmly as I would have done if I'd had to strike an immediate blow to keep from being slain.

"I've been alone here for five full minutes at least," Dan said, "possibly six or seven. But I'd have turned and waved if I'd seen anything moving outside, so don't feel you owe me an apology. If you'd welcome support, but don't feel justified in pressing the emergency-alert button, you've no right to complain."

For the first time since we'd left the house a slight smile made Dan's face look a little less grim than it had been, although in the glow of the flashlight the lines of strain about his mouth went a long way toward counterbalancing the change. He gestured toward the end of the cave. "What was she able to tell you?" he asked. "Do you know more about him now? Knowing exactly what kind of reptile he is would help. Or was it more a vulture taint that she detected when he stood close to her?"

I came very close to telling him that he was very wide of the mark, except in an *entirely* figurative sense. Vultures and snakes don't have too much in common with wolves. And I could have added, if he'd seemed to be in danger of taking that too seriously, that wolves had an odor no different from country-roaming dogs, or even foxes or weasels. Except, of course, to other wolves. Then I remembered the conversation we'd had on the road, right after we'd run down the weasel and I'd seen the shadow. I realized that drawing a parallel between the man who had attacked him on the stairs and a wolf would not have startled him too much. As far back as what had happened at the pool, thoughts I could no longer keep from thinking—had they ever actually been absent from my mind?—had taken firm root in his mind. He'd told me so, hadn't he?

He'd asked me just how much credence I put in the werewolf legend and whether I believed—

Ask him now, a voice seemed to whisper deep in my mind. There is no better time. We haven't been attacked yet, nothing has come from the darkness into the light, and we haven't heard again the mind-chilling cry of a man-beast worshipping its own savagery beneath a storm-darkened sky.

"Dan, listen to me," I heard myself saying. "Please listen carefully. Doris just told me something I find hard to believe. But I'm convinced she couldn't have just imagined it. When he came into her room and she struggled with him for a moment, and then realized that his strength was so great that struggling could not save her, she said that he was wearing a hood.

"It may have been a kind of headpiece or half headpiece—a large, masklike covering of cloth that went almost entirely around his head but left some of his hair exposed in back, where it may have been held in place by a string. Or it may have been a scarf or small tablecover, or even a *very* large handkerchief he'd snatched up quickly and thrown over his head, after ripping two eyeholes in it. I'm inclined to believe that's what it was. It was bunched up at the top of his head and bulges looked like the ears of an animal—large and sharply pointed and standing straight up."

"What are you trying to tell me, John?" Dan exclaimed, incredulously. "That the man had turned into a wolf? Did Doris say that?"

I shook my head. "She has been through enough. I thought I'd ask you instead."

"Ask me what? I'm afraid I—"

"I was going to ask you why he wasn't wearing a hood when you struggled with him on the stairs. It seems to have come as a complete surprise to you. If you had seen the headpiece I've just described, I'm quite sure it would have been the first thing you'd have told me when you came staggering into my room immediately after the attack. So you couldn't possibly have seen it."

"I didn't, naturally. He was bare-headed."

"All right, I believe you. But just while I've been standing here telling you about it another possibility has occurred to me. If it was just a scarf or a tablecover or something of the sort he'd thrown over his head, it might have come unknotted and fallen down over his chest or his shoulders. Did you see anything at all like that? It could have been so crumpled up it no longer looked like a hood, just a dangling scarf flung loosely around his neck."

"I'm not that unobservant," Dan said. "He was wearing an ordinary business suit, a white shirt, and a blue-and-white striped tie. I got a good look at him, front and back. I saw nothing like that—"

"Then he probably ripped the hood off before he started down the stairs," I said. "He may have felt it had become an encumbrance—possibly that the eyeholes were too small or had slipped too low, turning it into a kind of blindfold. But I don't think he would have ripped it off, instead of readjusting it if he'd been wearing it as a disguise to keep Doris from recognizing him, because when she recovered consciousness he made no attempt to conceal his identity."

"You mean—she'd seen him before somewhere."

"Yes," I said. "I'll tell you about that in a moment. I'm going to tell you everything she told me—just now and earlier. But this is just as important. I think he came into her room wearing a hood because he didn't want her to see *what he had become.* But when he reached the top of the stairs he changed again. He may have looked the *other* way for quite some time, so that a sudden change back wouldn't have been too surprising. But both changes could have taken place very swiftly, causing him to snatch up something to cover his head before entering her room, because he hadn't known how he'd look from minute to minute."

Dan said nothing, just stood very still staring at me, with the flashlight held a little less steadily.

"I'm not sure I'm right about any of this," I said. "But it's a possibility and, I think, a fairly strong one. If he'd known, just before he'd started down the stairs, that it would be a human face she'd see if he ripped off the mask, he might have done so—simply because it *had* become something of an encumbrance and he knew he could see better without it. Then he went on down the stairs to where you encountered him. Doris wasn't unconscious then, remember. She could have seen his face just as clearly as you did. And if she had seen—"

It was Dan who made it unnecessary for me to go on. "He wouldn't have had to strike her to make her go limp, that's for sure," he said. "She would have blacked out anyway. But I don't know, John—I just don't know. You're filling in some gaps in a terribly speculative way. You can only be sure of one thing. You have only Doris's word for it, but what she told you about the hood he was wearing carries conviction to me. Otherwise—"

"That's not the way you talked after you ran over the weasel on the road," I said. "You asked me if I took the werewolf legend seriously and I told you it was just a myth dating back to the Dark Ages. You said you'd been tormented by the thought that it might not be entirely a myth the moment you'd seen the wolfheaded bludgeon at the pool. And what you and Helen saw in the study could hardly have made you change your mind. Why have you changed it now?"

"I haven't," he assured me, "but two things worry me, John. When you try to fill in gaps as you've just done you can take the wrong turn in the road. You can go wandering off into a region that's just as dark and menacing, but what you fear most may be crouching in the shadows somewhere in another forest of the night.

"I'm not mixing my metaphors, John. By filling in the ruts—and we've been traveling over some that may have been much deeper than they looked—you can make a road seem straighter than it is. We know so little, despite everything that has happened."

"What's the second thing that worries you?"

"You were so damned evasive when I asked you if you took the myth seriously."

"It wasn't evasiveness," I said. "It was an outright lie.

I've taken it very seriously for some time. I began doing that when I explored some of the Bulgarian mountain caves for the first time with Margrave."

"It's all right to be less than truthful about small things," Dan said. "I've never met and talked with anyone who has worked out a successful way of avoiding it. But it wasn't a small thing. It was something I felt I had to know."

"I'm sorry," I said. "But I felt it might not be wise—or kind—to tell you everything *I* knew. You were under a pretty severe strain, and we might not have located this cave at all if you'd turned the car around and driven back to the house."

"Because of Helen? If that's what you mean, I'm going to find it very hard to forgive you."

"I was afraid you might find it hard," I said. "Perhaps you can't now. I'm not even sure you might not want to knock me down and beat my brains out. But a man does what he feels he must. And we'd gone so far that if we'd turned back after we'd run down the weasel Doris might not be alive."

He was silent for a moment, and I was almost sure he had never waged a more tormenting inner struggle with himself. I knew he'd won it when he said: "I wouldn't have acted any differently, if the circumstances had been reversed. Condemning you for something I'd have done myself would be the kind of hypocrisy I'd find it very hard to live with."

But I knew he took no pleasure in his victory, because it was the kind of self-triumph that turns to bitter ashes almost immediately. Still I didn't think he'd go on hating me, even if it cost him an effort that drew blood.

There had been other considerations which had made me hesitate to tell Dan everything I knew and suspected, chiefly because there are experiences you can't bear to dwell upon yourself. But now I regretted that I'd kept anything from him. Over-caution is almost always a mistake, even with a man as hard-headed and skeptical as Brindley, and I was sorry now I hadn't told him more than I had. In

Dan's case it had been a much greater mistake, and the danger we were in made absolute candor a necessity.

I told him first what I had just learned from Doris, for I feared that if we took too far a journey into the past a shadow might fall across the mouth of the cave and put an end to talking before I could make him realize just how great the danger had become. It wasn't only what I'd just told him about the hood, but everything that Doris had said that had a direct bearing on Dan's ability to stay alert and on guard.

Just knowing what her abductor had said and done after bringing her to the cave would, I felt, add to his knowledge of the man. He could not have too much knowledge of that nature if he was to carry on a struggle in which the slightest trace of irresolution could have disastrous consequences.

He did not interrupt me as I talked. Soon I was describing the mountain cave in the Balkans, and what I had seen there and how great had been my fear as I had fled down the mountainside, thinking that at any moment I might be overtaken and slain.

I told him about the shadow's reappearance after my return to the United States. How often had I come to an abrupt halt while walking along a country road or on a crowded city street, feeling an invisible presence hovering over me, watching the vague outlines of a great wolfhead darken the sunlight immediately in my path? And I told him how the shadow sometimes appeared elsewhere: on a high stone fence or the hood of a parked car or the windowpanes of an old building crumbling into ruin.

I told him how the horror had looked when I'd seen it that morning, casting a shadow that had seemed to be reaching out toward the chair where Margrave sat, his face a ghastly mockery of the way it had been in life—the skin blanched white, but only where the bludgeon had failed to descend.

I reminded him again of what he and Helen had seen when the shadow had formed by the window and the small scatter rug had caught fire.

I told him about the drawing I had made in an attempt to summon the great wolfhead by means of a pictorial replica—with tempera colors for its eyes and lolling tongue—a drawing which it might or might not have seen lying upended on the floor when he had come reeling into the room with his lips almost as bloodless as Margrave's forever silent ones had been. But he had certainly seen the charred statuettes on the mantel and must have wondered about them.

I did not pause to ask him why he'd said nothing about them at the time, because his agitation had probably been so great he'd dismissed the charring as of little consequence and it seemed of little consequence now. I was trying very hard to make him see the horror as it had looked just before the fire, the twisted, deformed legs of the dangling dwarf body not quite descending to the floor as the great wolfhead swept toward me across the room.

I told him how, when I had beat out the flames on the mantel, I had swung about to find it gone.

The rest he knew, because it concerned him as well.

No, not quite all of the rest, for he hadn't seen the shadow lengthening on the road when I'd crossed to the other side to hurl the weasel as far as I could into the underbrush.

I told him about that, too.

Then I went back and related what Doris had told me about her abductor before he had carried her from the house. I told him about the visit a small, dark man had made two days previously—how he'd stood for a moment in the hall outside Margrave's study making vicious threats. I said that if I hadn't been in the village at the time, he might have been in the hospital now, and not waiting just outside the cave. Doris would have been still in her room, guarded as only a greatly loved woman can be.

"We don't *know* that he's waiting just outside the cave," Dan said, the instant I fell silent. He was white and shaken, and had probably said the first thing that had come into his mind because he couldn't trust himself to say anything more.

But he couldn't have said anything of greater immediate importance.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It took us three or four minutes to come to a decision. I told Dan what Doris had said, and then he was so quick to agree that the drawing of straws had gone out well before World War Two, that I didn't waste time pointing out that even if you only saw it in old movies there were worse ways of deciding whether, out of two or five or seven people, you were going to be the least likely to go on living.

I started by pointing out that since I'd put Doris's safety above Helen's I owed him something in compensation and it probably wouldn't have to be my life. If it was—it would be the kind of risk I should be willing to take to repay that kind of a debt.

I think he knew that I meant it, for his face set in tight lines and he shook his head.

"That's a crazy way to feel," he said. "I thought I'd made it plain that I would have put Helen's safety above Doris's if the circumstances had been reversed. You've done nothing you need to feel guilty about. When we start condemning people out of hand for being human we're really in trouble."

"Well then—look at it in a different way," I said. "Doris will be in more danger than Helen if I don't get to Brindley and bring him back here with a dozen men. Shouldn't I be the one to risk my life? Doris couldn't possibly mean as much to you, so it would be asking much more of you. A higher level of self-sacrifice, if you want to think of it in that way. It's something no one would have the right to ask or expect—unless you were the only one she could depend on for help. You don't happen to be."

"There's still another way of looking at it," Dan said. "Doris is right. I'm so worried about Helen right now I've just about decided I can't stay here much longer. I'll go anyway, even if you do. But you won't—because you'd never leave Doris alone here. Not after what I've just said. I've said it and it's true, and I'm pretty sure you know it's true. That should settle it."

He handed me the flashlight. "Here, take this and just don't say anything more. It would do no good. My mind is made up. I'm going right now, because the longer it's put off the higher the little red ball is going to ascend on the danger scale."

I would have been lying in my teeth if I'd said his decision was a blow to me—not because I'd been spared the need of risking my own life. But because I was afraid that, if I left, Doris might let go completely. There have been times when, like everyone else, I haven't been too happy about the thought of risking my life. But just by a not too unusual quirk of circumstance this didn't happen to be one of those times. It's all a matter of glands, I think, and what your emotional state in general happens to be at a particular time. I'm quite sure I could have emerged from the cave, zigzagged in and out between the trees until I got to Dan's car, and driven all the way to the village without experiencing a trace of fear. But if someone had told me I'd have to do that tomorrow or the next day I'm afraid to think what my state would have been.

"If he doesn't get me the instant I'm outside I'll have a very good chance of reaching the road alive," Dan said, as if he were aware of my thoughts. "It's a big forest, with a lot of trees to spoil his aim. If you shoot at a running shadow in the woods the bullets will as likely as not go thudding into bark."

He nodded and gave my shoulder a thump. "Don't look so worried, pal. I'll make it. The odds are in my favor. Just keep that light trained about the way you're doing now—no, wait. The level isn't quite high enough."

He gripped my wrist and raised it a few inches. "There. That's the way it should be."

"It will take you at least an hour to get to the village and return," I said. "That creates a problem. Doris would feel more secure if I waited at the end of the cave. But if I did the light would be no brighter here than it is there. And I wouldn't consider letting her join me here. She's much safer where she is."

"Play it by ear then. Take a slight risk if you feel you must go back and reassure her from time to time. It's what I would do. So long as the entrance isn't in complete darkness—"

He nodded and turned. "Maybe I can shave ten or fifteen minutes off that hour," he said. "We'll see."

The instant he vanished into the darkness outside I took a smaller risk than the one I knew I'd be taking later on. I turned around and trained the flashlight at the end of the cave.

Doris hadn't moved. She was still sitting, not standing, exactly where I'd told her it would be best for her to remain. There was a startled look in her eyes when I lowered the beam a little. But otherwise she did not seem as unnerved as I'd feared she might have become in the five or six minutes it had taken one of us to move. That it was Dan who had moved, outward into the darkness, and I was still standing well inside the entrance dazzling her with the beam must have come as a tremendous relief to her. It helped to explain why she looked less shaken than I was at that particular moment.

It was a very bad moment for me, because I knew that Dan would be in the greatest danger in the first twenty or thirty seconds. About all I was capable of doing could have brought Doris very little reassurance. My arm shook as I waved to her and swung back to keep the flashlight as steadily trained as I could on the jagged-edged rectangle of pulsing blackness which had swallowed Dan up.

Scuffling sounds just outside the cave would have been alarming enough, but what I most dreaded to hear would have been the blast of a gun.

But no sound at all came out of the blackness. I was just beginning to breathe more freely again when footsteps crunched on the gravel a few feet from where I was standing, and Dan came back into the cave.

He looked just as shaken as he'd been when he'd come staggering into my room right after he'd been attacked on the stairs. But his clothes were no more torn than they had been after the attack in the cave, and there were no new bruises on his face and chest.

It was his eyes that looked bruised, as if something he had seen had struck them with the force of a physical blow. He started to speak, gripping me tightly by the wrist and half-swinging me about, as if my slowness in raising my eyes to his face after lowering them for an instant was causing him unbearable anguish.

"For God's sake, look at me, John. I can't talk if you're going to just stand there staring at my gaping wounds. If I was stripped for a physical you wouldn't find any new ones. Donaldson's lying just outside with his throat torn out, and blood all over him. That's all I came back to tell you. If I hadn't—"

Before he could go on, the far-off cry we'd heard once before came to our ears, causing him to stiffen to sudden alertness. His eyes darted toward the pulsing darkness from which he had just returned. It was still a distant howling such as a dog might have made if it had paused in the woods to bay at the moon. But this time it seemed more of a wolflike cry, too savage in timbre to have come from the throat of a dog that was not wolflike in size—some enormous beast that had been trained to kill, as police dogs sometimes were, in teeth-rending ferocity the instant their suspicions were aroused. But why should I have clung to such a thought when I knew it was most unlikely to be anything but what Dan so clearly believed now—and what I had not really doubted when we'd heard the cry for the first time.

"Donaldson's right outside," Dan said for the second time, as if the thread of what he'd started to say had been broken by the cry. However, it was what he had seen, rather than what we had both just heard, that had come back into his mind in a close-to-shattering way.

It had come back into my mind, too, making me almost forget the cry. The cry was unnerving enough, coming at such a time. But what he'd said about Donaldson was far more than chilling. It was tragic and horrible. When a man is killed a few minutes after he's been walking about and talking to you, the sound of his voice still almost echoing in your ears—no one ever seems quite so much alive as when he's gripped by fear and tension—his death can seem an unnatural thing. No matter how often an exploding hand-grenade or a speeding bullet can make that occurrence a familiar one to a soldier, a sense of unreality, of stunned disbelief, can hardly fail to accompany it. And it seems, somehow, to confront the mind with a new dimension of horror.

Dan was saying something else now that I had to strain to catch, his voice scarcely rising above a whisper.

"I'm going right back out there and try to get to the car. That howl came from a distance. I'm not going to wait for it to come nearer. He's somewhere in the woods now and not right outside and I won't get a better chance by waiting—just the opposite."

"You're right about that," I heard myself saying. "Why did you come back at all?"

"I felt you should know about Donaldson. I couldn't just go on and leave him lying there without telling you."

What did he expect me to do, I wondered. Go out with the flashlight, lift him up, and carry him inside? I'd have done that if I'd felt there was the remotest chance of his being still alive. But I couldn't see myself doing that with a corpse, if only because of what the sight might do to Doris.

"Are you sure he's dead?" I asked, taking firm hold of his arm. "Tell me—are you absolutely sure. I've got to know."

"He's dead—no doubt of it. There's nothing left of his throat. And his head is crushed. Margrave wasn't killed any more brutally."

"Then why did you come back?"

"Because I felt it would be better if you knew. You can't know too much—it can't *harm* you to know. It doesn't increase the danger and may lessen it. Don't ask me how— I've no idea right at the moment. But it could help you in some way when he comes back, as I'm sure he will. Don't you see, John? If you had no idea Donaldson was out there you might be tempted to take greater risks. You might— Oh, hell, you know what I'm trying to say."

"Yes, I guess I do," I said. "Thanks for coming back, Dan."

"What is it, Dan? What has happened?"

I hadn't heard Doris cross the cave at all, and when I turned to face her the look on my face must have startled her, for she took a quick step backward.

"I just came to remind John of something I wasn't sure he'd keep in mind," Dan said quickly. "The best way to hold the flash, so that the light stays very bright and steady here and spreads to the end of the cave. A small matter, but I felt it was important enough to be worth the loss of a minute or two. We decided it would be better if I went to get Brindley. You must have guessed that when you saw me go. Now I've got to leave again, without losing another two or three minutes."

"You looked terribly agitated, Dan. And John did too. That's why I couldn't stay where he seems to feel I'll be in considerably less danger. I think it's probably nonsense."

"It's not nonsense," I told her. "It's much more dangerous to stand right at the entrance. Please, darling—go back and stay there. We looked agitated because we've both been building up tensions and Dan gave me a start by returning so quickly."

Dan smiled, but I could see that it cost him an effort. "I imagine I looked the same way for an instant because I was startled by the way John looked," he said. "John's right, Doris. You'll be safer at the far end. I don't think I'll be gone for more than an hour, at most. But it might be longer. The only really bad mistake you could make would be to let yourself become convinced that something has happened to me. The chances are all against that."

The cry we'd heard had seemed so distant that I could readily believe now that he was right. Apparently, Doris hadn't heard it. I was just as well satisfied that she hadn't, and had no intention of mentioning it.

She refused to move from my side until Dan had passed for the second time through the rectangle of pulsing blackness beyond which the wind was still howling. The storm had clearly darkened the sky completely now, for though nightfall was more than two hours away there was no light at all from outside where we were standing. It surprised me a little that Dan had been able to confirm what he had told me about Donaldson beyond any possibility of doubt. But then I remembered how much you can see in a swiftly dimming light at times, particularly when you are in the presence of death. That might even hold true, I felt, in the depths of a sealed sepulchre, lighted only by a phosphorescent glimmering.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

It is never an easy thing to stand very still and wait, for something that may never happen or happen more quickly than you've allowed yourself to believe. And when you are waiting not just for one possible occurrence, but two, and the first you dread and the second you feel quite differently about, the uncertainty can become quickly unendurable.

There are moments when you lose all track of time and others when you remember again exactly how many minutes have gone sweeping by—must have gone sweeping by—even when you have no watch.

I'd left mine on the mantel in my room, because the fire I'd beaten out had cracked and blackened the frame, and it had seemed an ugly thing to keep attached to my wrist. I could remember unstrapping it and tossing it on the mantel an instant before I'd heard Dan's footsteps clattering in the hall just outside the door. Perhaps I'd needed to do something like that to distract my mind for an instant, when my dread had been as unendurable as it was threatening to become now.

Dan had been wearing a wristwatch, but I had not thought to ask him what time it was when he'd given it just one quick glance. I regretted that I hadn't told him that I would need it more than he did, for the only time that mattered now was the time that would have to pass before we could hope for his return.

Waiting can be even worse when you know that you are standing guard, that your life is less important to you than the safety of someone else.

I remained at the entrance for a very long time, for I questioned the soundness of the suggestion Dan had made. To join Doris at the end of the cave might not have been a very risky thing to do if I just kissed her and came straight back again. But any risk, however small, could become a much greater one if you took it at the wrong time and I had no way of knowing what the right time might be.

Doris hadn't heard the far-off cry from where she was at the back of the cave. What if it came again, much nearer, when I was deep in the cave and I failed to hear it —when such a failure would have increased our danger fivefold?

So all I did, for the first ten or fifteen minutes, was turn and wave reassuringly to Doris four times. She waved back. I played the flashlight all around the walls of the cave and let the beam stream upward, as if I were searching for bats in the crevices of the rough stone surface overhead. "It's all right!" I called out. "I was just testing the strength of the batteries. I wouldn't want them to go dead on us."

It was the first time I'd risked shouting, and it made no sense at all, for it would have been more likely to alarm her than otherwise. But I had felt that if I did not do something to relieve the strain I would be tempted to go back to where she was sitting and take her in my arms and hold her tightly for a full minute, perhaps longer, and I might have become just careless enough to forget how important it was to keep the flashlight steadily trained on the entrance.

I didn't think that Doris would make that kind of mistake. But the strain had seemingly become just as difficult for her to endure, and before another ten minutes had passed she was standing at my side for the second time.

It was impossible for me to feel angry, but I knew that if I did not pretend to be she would refuse to go back. But before I could turn to speak harshly to her the distant cry came again.

It was still a fairly far-off cry, but it had unmistakably come nearer. It seemed even more savage in timbre than it had been when Dan and I had heard it for the second time. And if I had clung to the slightest doubt before, if I had still told myself that it might just possibly be a dog, if only because there *were* a number of stray dogs roaming the woods, I could not do so now.

It was the cry of a wolf, beyond any possibility of doubt, and I knew what kind of a wolf it was.

For a moment I strained my ears, hoping that the cry might come again. It had lasted for only a few seconds before, then died away into silence. This time it had been just a little more prolonged. But it had not been repeated before and it was not repeated now.

In a storm all sounds become distorted. It could have been close to a mile away, or half a mile or even considerably nearer. A wind-borne cry, whether it is that of a man or a beast, can seem more distant, than it is—or be coming from a greater distance than a cry would ordinarily travel.

I found myself wondering—and no thought could have been more wildly irrelevant—whether wolves had an instinctive tendency to roam immediately after they had satisfied their hunger by slaying. Quite probably they did, for it was a tendency that seemed natural to associate with all savage beasts of prey. I was almost sure, in fact, that I had read somewhere that just such a tendency had been observed, many hundreds of times, not only in wolves, but in rapacious birds, and big jungle cats. Was the same tendency also present in man? Not all men, but those who most resembled—

I put a quick end to such thoughts, for there was nothing to be gained by pursuing them. They were wildly irrelevant because an ordinary beast of prey, whether mammal or bird, would be unlikely to possess instincts identical with those of a man who was half a beast and a beast that was half a man.

And even if I'd been mistaken—even if it wasn't irrelevant, and if, when the transformation took place, the instincts of an ordinary wolf would dominate every aspect of the horror's behavior—what could I hope to gain by trying to fathom the exact nature of so great and terrible a mystery?

Could it lessen the dreadful danger we were in, give me some new weapon, some hitherto unsuspected weapon that would enable me to cope with it? I did not think so.

There was only one weapon that might possess some value. I doubted if it could keep the horror from attacking us for long. But if it returned to the cave before Dan got back with Brindley, I couldn't see myself taking Doris quietly aside and telling her that nothing could save us. We wouldn't just stand there waiting, very still and proud and defiant, like two eighteenth-century characters, in some old woodcut dating back to the French Revolution, being driven to the guillotine in an ox-cart. I couldn't see myself doing that at all and I hoped that Doris couldn't either.

It was the kind of weapon I had always pictured to myself as being as old as time—most people seemed to picture it in that way—even though, as an archeologist, I knew better. It wasn't quite as ancient as that, for it dated back only to the discovery of fire—and it *was* fire.

If Jung had been right, and we all carried around with us, buried deep in our minds, archetypal images of the great birds and reptiles and fur-coated carnivores that plagued our remote ancestors as far back as the Dawn Age, that gallery of primordal monsters must have included hideous shapes of darkness as well.

And what weapon would Dawn Man have been most likely to use against so monstrous a threat? Was there not an archetypal image of high-leaping flames in the depths of the human mind as well? If there were no such image, why should man have always thought of fire as something primordal and eternal, antedating its actual discovery. Why had it always seemed both terrifying in its destructiveness and a symbol of light and power surrounding the heads of gods—if it had not been thought capable of overcoming and dispelling the invisible forces of darkness?

Why—if it had not been thought of as the most formidable of human weapons?

Fight fire with fire. Might there not well be something about that admonition which made it the exact opposite of what it seemed—a perverse, and scientifically unsound cliche?

I turned abruptly and took firm hold of Doris's shoulders and made it plain that all nonsense must be put aside. I walked with her all the way back to the end of the cave, taking care to keep her from stumbling by not relaxing my grip until she was sitting down again.

She remained just angry enough to say, "If another man had done that I'd have slapped him twice, hard. You've no right to treat me like a child."

"I'm sorry, darling," I said. "But I'm going outside and I can't risk having you behave like a child again."

"You're going—outside? Are you out of your mind?"

I'd never before seen alarm and concern dispel the anger in a woman's eyes quite so fast.

"Just for about two or three minutes. I think I can gather enough brushwood to make a fairly large fire without going more than ten or twelve feet from the entrance. I won't set fire to it right away. But I want it to be there, so that I can put a match to it at any time."

"A fire? You mean you really think a fire could stop that kind of man from coming back? He'd come right in through the flames without giving a thought to how badly he might be burned. I'm sure of that, John. It would do no good, it wouldn't help and—I don't want you to go outside."

She didn't, of course, know even now—didn't really suspect that the shape that would come leaping toward us through the flames—if it did—would resemble a man only in one shriveled, dwarfish part of itself. But I was glad I hadn't told her as much as I'd told Dan—or any important part, actually, of what I'd told him. It would have been just about the most senseless thing I could have done, and I had no regrets on that score. But it meant I had to go on deceiving her.

"A fire would help, Doris," I said. "If the blaze turns into a solid sheet of flame sweeping across the entrance, he'll think twice before he tries to cross it. He won't want to become a human torch."

"It won't be enough," she said. "He'll take that risk if he has to. I'm sure of it."

"Perhaps," I said. "But I still intend to go outside and collect some brushwood, just as a safeguard. I don't know why I didn't think of it right after Dan left."

"I wish you hadn't thought of it now."

"I'll only be gone a moment," I said. "And I'll take the flash with me. Whatever you do, *don't come out looking for me.*"

"I will if you don't come right back," she said.

That didn't worry me, because I was sure I could collect enough brushwood in two or three minutes to keep her from doing anything so reckless.

I feared that if I bent and kissed her again she might think that I had been deceiving her and intended to be gone much longer. So I simply turned and went back to the front of the cave, walking very swiftly, to make it plain that I was just as anxious as she was for the task to be over and done with.

The instant I was outside I realized that it was no longer just the continuing storm and the heavily overcast sky that was responsible for the darkness. Night had descended on the clearing.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

He was still lying where Dan had found him, within a few feet of the entrance. But Dan had stopped just long enough to cover his head and shoulders with a fallen bough that had not been stripped of its leaves by the wind.

If Donaldson could have known, I think it would have pleased him, for the leaves had a myrtle-green look and none of them were withered.

I stopped just long enough to play the flashlight over him briefly, wishing that I could avert my eyes but feeling it was another kind of respect I was duty-bound to pay him.

It was not right, I felt, to simply ignore a man lying dead whom you have just recently met and liked. But I turned away quickly enough, sick at heart, and started gathering as much brushwood as I could within the time limit I'd set for myself—chiefly to spare Doris unnecessary strain and uncertainty.

I could have made the pile of brittle twigs, tangled vines, and dried-out fragments of bark that I tossed down directly in front of the entrance rise higher, if I'd had five minutes in which to search for material that looked readily combustible. But I found two quite large, hollow logs before I had finished. When I added them to the pile, I felt that I couldn't have done much better. The brushwood rose as high as my waist, and when once it was ignited I was sure the flames would ascend to five times that height and the fire would continue to blaze for at least twenty minutes.

But I had no intention of starting a fire unless I had no alternative and were attacked before Dan could get back with Brindley. Only an attack could have justified starting a blaze that might very easily have swept the clearing and then spread to the surrounding trees and underbrush.

I was just turning to go back into the cave, satisfied with what I had accomplished, when I caught a glimpse of something moving—just at the edge of the beam where it shaded off into darkness.

I swung about and turned the light full on it.

It was the largest wolf I had ever seen. It was much larger than a Great Dane, and it was crouching on its haunches with its teeth savagely bared and saliva drooling from its jaws. Just below the back of its neck, and in a ridge along its back, there was a bristling of hairs that gave it a more ready-to-spring, ferocious look than even its bared teeth, and the glassily staring, beam-mirroring eyes. It was mottled gray and white.

It was staring directly at me. Although the beam must have half-blinded it for an instant, I was sure that it saw me, for it began to growl deep in its throat. I was just as sure that it would leap straight at me if I kept the beam trained on it for five more seconds. So I clicked the flashlight off.

I had never felt quite so abnormally calm. I knew exactly why, and it did not even surprise me. It was the kind of calmness that can come upon you when something more powerful than a lightning bolt strikes down through you, deadening every nerve in your body, making it impossible for you to feel anything at all.

First the deadening and then an awful kind of awareness that can come flooding into your riven brain and make you want to scream.

But what is most strange—the capacity for thought doesn't leave you; it is not destroyed even though you can't think in a normal way or quite grasp the implications of what you've seen. But you are not surprised. You know, and you understand. You've been mercifully spared full awareness for a moment, but you know that it will come. And when it does—

When it did I came very close to crying out and staggering backward in the darkness, and I almost let the flashlight drop to the ground. But I managed somehow to tighten my grip on it instead and fumble in my pocket with my left hand until my fingers closed around the butane cigarette lighter that I somehow managed to separate from more coins than I usually carry. Only its cylindrical shape enabled me to do that quickly, for it was not much larger than a fifty-cent piece.

The butane ignited the instant I whipped it out of my pocket, and pressed on it with my thumb. I bent and played it back and forth over the brushwood until some small, brittle twigs burst into flame. The lighter went out and I ignited it again and hurled it into the pile where the brushwood was much denser, and I'd upended one of the large, hollow logs. Another flame arose and spread before the buttane flame expired for a second time.

It seemed incredible that the flames could have spread so fast. The fire brightened and ran like a nest of snakes from twig to creeper to log, until two-thirds of the pile was a blazing mass that lighted up the ground in all directions for several yards.

It brought the great, crouching beast into view again and in a far more frightening way, for I could no longer bring back the darkness by clicking off the beam.

Then it dawned on me that clicking off the beam would have done no good at all, even if there had been no fire. It could have leapt upon me at any time if it had wanted to. Scent alone would have enabled it to follow every movement that I had made.

Both dogs and wolves lived for scents, followed scents for miles, killed far more often by scent than by sight.

If it had not already leapt straight at me and torn out my throat it could only be because it was still tensing itself for a spring. Sometimes it took a long time for a jungle beast to leap upon its prey.

I did not know that Doris had left the cave until I saw her standing where the flames had not yet quite reached. She was looking from the wolf to me and back again to the wolf. Her face was ashen, her eyes both terrified and despairing, and she had bit her underlip so that a trickle of blood was running down her chin.

No, no, I thought, let it be me. Then perhaps Doris can run and run, and there may be some chance for her—some small chance, however remote.

Then I suddenly remembered the fire again and why I had gathered the brushwood and what I had told myself about fire—even though it had been something I could only half-believe.

The wolf was staring at Doris now, its enormous head so brightened by the glare that its teeth seemed to be edged with fire. Its pointed ears were so swirlingly aglow that they looked like tapers of flame, and it had turned half-about and seemed to have forgotten me for a moment.

I was almost sure now that it was at Doris that it would leap first, for she was standing just a little nearer to it. Her fright was so great I had the feeling that it had instinctively sensed how incapable she was of moving. In another moment, I knew, I could not have gotten to her side without plunging through the flames and groping desperately about in search of her. That did not mean that the flames were not still far enough from where she was standing to give me sufficient time to encircle the fire before the wolf leapt, or the flames blotted out the cave completely. But I was just as quick to realize that I could not hope to save her if I arrived at her side weaponless. I'd kept this in mind until I'd seen the wolf, then forgotten, and remembering again drove every other thought from my mind.

I did not bend and snatch up a burning bough from the high-leaping flames until I was well past where they raged most fiercely. The heat would have scorched my face and forced me to leap back empty-handed. I burned my hands a little, however, and risked burning them more when I tore away the leaves and brittle side twigs and left only the stout hickory part of the bough, which was not more than one-third ablaze.

In another moment I was standing directly in front of Doris, facing the wolf with a branch that was two-thirds ablaze. But the fire had not yet spread to my hand and its length made that seem unlikely before the wolf leapt straight at me, or didn't leap at all. I knew that if it sprang at me, I could do no more than leap aside and lash at its head with the bough in the hope that it would be blinded by the flames and go hurtling past me. But if he continued to crouch there motionless, if another ten seconds went by and it still didn't leave the ground, I knew exactly what I would have to do.

It would have been the greatest risk I had ever taken or would be likely to take again. But to just stand there waiting for it to attack would have been unthinkable.

I would have to advance upon it, step by step, waving the torch about until I had confirmed that everything I'd told myself about the fire was true—or totally false. If it recoiled with every step I took, it might well become so overwhelmed with fear that it would turn and flee from the blazing bough as if some dimly sensed, ancestral threat, remembered only by wolves, had planted a flaming arrow in its brain.

I'd paused for an instant only because I felt it might be too late to stop it from attacking me, no matter what I did. Also, I did not want the leap to come when I was in motion, with the torch held less steadily and half-blinding me with its glare.

But when the crouching beast remained as still as it had been a moment before, I started to move toward it, holding the blazing bough at arm's length and waving it back and forth. Of one thing I was almost sure: if it did not attack before I was within eight or ten feet of it I would know that it feared the fire and would probably not attack at all.

But the leap, when it came, proved me neither right nor wrong, for it could not have been caused by anything its animal brain could have known in advance.

It was accompanied by the deafening roar of a gun. The fur on its head reddened so instantly that the bullet must have gone crashing into its brain before it rose from the ground and thudded to the earth again from ten feet in the air.

The leap had carried it straight up, and then backward, with its legs spread wide. It came down at least twenty feet from where I'd halted when the gun had thundered in the darkness at the far side of the clearing. Although the brushwood blaze did not brighten more than a few of the nearer trees, the slain beast was lying now where the radiance was very bright, and I could clearly see what the bullet, or bullets—I could not be sure whether I'd heard just one blast, or two very swiftly merging ones—had done to its head. One of its ears had been shot away and blood was trickling from its eyes and mouth, collecting in a darkly gleaming puddle on the hard-packed earth.

I heard Doris cry out. But before I could turn something began to happen that I did not want her to see, and I swung about so fast that I almost stumbled and fell. But I managed to catch hold of her just as *she* seemed about to fall, and draw her close to me, gently placing my hand on the back of her head and pressing her face against my chest to keep her from staring past me.

"It's all right," I said. "Just stay still for a moment. Dan's here with Brindley and they'll be coming out of the woods in a moment. If you don't let go it will be better all around—for me, Dan, everyone. Steady now—it's just an animal that has been shot to death."

"It was . . . horrible."

"Steady. It's going to be all right."

For a moment I'd been forced to stand facing away from the slain beast. But now I turned again, still keeping her from raising her face by holding her even more tightly. We turned together, but I doubted if she was aware of turning at all. She was trembling violently and seemed to welcome that brief opportunity to blot out what she had seen.

What I hadn't wanted her to see, which she hadn't, had already taken place.

The great, blood-darkened wolfhead hadn't changed at all. But the body had shriveled, and all of the fur from its head to its tail had vanished, and it was the naked body of a dwarf I saw lying in a crumpled heap on the ground. It was the same dwarf body that I had seen at the mouth of the cave in Bulgaria and many times elsewhere. It, too, hadn't changed, except for the blood that drenched it.

Then—so swiftly that I had no fear that Doris would raise her head and witness the change—the great head and the shriveled body disappeared and the small, dark-complexioned man who had been so conservatively attired lay sprawled out on the ground. His clothes were crumpled now, and stained with mold, and his left ear was missing. From his mouth there protruded a swollen and blackened tongue.

I knew that Doris would have to be told about the last change, but for the moment I didn't want her to know. It would surely be better if she could be kept from knowing until I could think of some way of convincing her that it hadn't really been a change at all. I would explain that the wolf had simply crawled away, mortally wounded, into the forest. And as for her abductor—surely it would not be too hard to make her believe that he had been killed by another shot and had just come crawling out of the underbrush.

When I saw Dan and the sheriff and three other men emerge from the woods and come striding toward us across the clearing, I felt that it might not be too difficult to keep her from raising her eyes until she was standing a short distance away, and the body had been covered up. I knew that I was going to need Dan's help.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Some of the things Dan told me could have waited until much later. But Dan seemed to feel that it would be a mistake, while Brindley was waiting for more men to arrive, not to take full advantage of an opportunity to talk that might enable me to return to the house with a reasonable expectation of staying sane.

We were sitting on a fallen tree stump about thirty feet from the cave. Brindley was still busy with a walkie-talkie and the men he'd brought with him were just as busy putting out the brushwood fire. Doris was sitting at the base of a sturdy oak on the edge of the clearing, waiting for me to come back and reassure her again. But she'd gotten over her first shock and had insisted that, whatever it was that Dan felt I should know about, the best time to tell me was now.

He started by telling me just how angry I'd made Brindley by not taking him completely into my confidence from the start.

"You could have overcome his skepticism, John," Dan said. "He's a stubborn, hard-to-convince man, but if Helen could do it I'm sure he would have taken what you could have told him very seriously. But that's water over the dam now."

"Just what did Helen tell him?" I asked. "And when and why and how? You haven't told me anything at all yet. Or are you forgetting that?"

"No, no, I'm not forgetting. But I'll have to prune off a great deal, strip it the way you did that burning bough you said you snatched from the fire. We haven't too much time."

"We'll have plenty of time in the months and years ahead to think about every part of it," I said. "Perhaps we won't be too happy about that. Anyway, stripping it down will be all right, providing you don't leave out anything that's vital."

"I'll try not to," Dan said. "If Helen hadn't become so alarmed when I left her alone in her room to go downstairs—incidentally, it was just because I'd become too restless to remain upstairs—she wouldn't have gone out into the hall as quickly as she did and found the hood. When she saw there were eyeholes cut in it she naturally became even more alarmed, and went on down the stairs and saw what happened to be the poor devil Brindley had left in the living room to guard the house.

"It was so terrible a shock to her that she went all to pieces. It didn't take her long to realize she was alone in the house and she started running in and out of all the rooms downstairs in a wild sort of way—the way people will do when they're hysterical, overwhelmed with fear.

"I don't know just what made her rip open all the drawers of the desk in Margrave's study until she found both the document that told her almost everything that you knew, but we didn't, and the small statuette your friend from the Balkans had crossed the Atlantic to try to get back. She doesn't know, can't explain it, and neither can I. But if you'll remember what Hamlet said to Horatio, it may help to make it a little less inexplicable. 'There are more things . . .' "

"All right, let it go at that," I told him. "If Margrave had wanted her to know right at that moment, desperately wanted to get through to her, he might have succeeded. Just what was in the document? What kind of document was it exactly?"

"Something he'd written out himself . . . five pages. He said that the statuette he'd found in a cave in Bulgaria was—a transformation-controlling talisman."

"A what?"

"A magical talisman that would enable its owner to change from a man into a wolf and back again into a man in an always controlled, always predictable, way—at any time its owner wanted to bring the transformation about. Without the talisman, the change could not be controlled and would occur unpredictably. Then its owner would be forced to run like a wolf through the night when he might not want to—when the risk of discovery would be too great. He would be forced to slay whether he wanted to or not."

"Good God!"

"You didn't know that?"

"I didn't know what it was that Margrave had found," I said. "He never told me."

"Apparently your friend from the Balkans thought otherwise," Dan said. "Wait a minute—I remember now. Before I went to get help you told me that was probably why he took such an interest in you."

"He wasn't my friend; you can be sure of that," I said. "I can't even remember just where I met him, and under what circumstances. I'll never know now, but it's not important. It was probably at some inn where we were staying at the time. But he did think I knew—he must have—and when I went to the same cave alone, just by accident, without knowing Margrave had been exploring there before, he followed me. And since Margrave had the talisman he couldn't control his transformation even as early as that. He changed into a shape of all horror. There seems to have been an intermediate stage, when he had the head of a wolf and the body of a human dwarf. But he could become wholly a wolf as well, and he was wholly a wolf when Brindley shot him."

"With a silver bullet," Dan said.

"With—*what did you say?*"

"A silver bullet," he repeated. "It's the only way you can kill a werewolf. You ought to know that."

"But how could he possibly—"

"Helen found a pistol loaded with six silver bullets when she removed all of the books from one of the study shelves. Margrave had clearly been living in fear for some time. That makes me think, as you say, that he must have found some way of getting through to her. No matter how hysterically wrought up she was it's hard to see how she could have found the gun otherwise. You don't just walk to a bookshelf and start ripping down books at random, even if you're so irrationally distraught you do all kinds of crazy things."

"And she convinced Brindley that it was silver bullets he'd need?" I asked. "I don't see how she could have made him believe that, even if she showed him a document in Margrave's handwriting that shook him up considerably."

"As I told you, Brindley can change his ideas. When he broke the pistol open and saw what it contained he was willing to take it along. When he caught sight of the wolf his ideas changed even more."

"Just two other things," I said. "They aren't too vital, but they still puzzle me. I told you, when we found the wolfhead bludgeon at the pool that I thought it was a magical staff of some kind. I still do. Why did he feel it was better than an ordinary weapon when he couldn't control his transformation enough to enable him to slay as a wolf?"

"He didn't think it was any better than a heavy cane would have been," Dan said. "But he carried it with him at all times because it helped him to control the transformation *just a little*. It was a substitute talisman—better than none at all. That's all in the document which Helen found. Margrave seemingly knew about the staff."

"He may well have carried more than one substitute talisman," I said, nodding. "All across Europe, keeping them with him on the plane, desperately hoping he'd find a new one as good as the one he'd lost. He must have had some bad moments on the plane—if he took a plane."

"The passengers would have had some bad moments, too," Dan said. It was an understatement, but I said nothing in reply. The picture of a wolf running back and forth in a big passenger plane, slaying compulsively, and unable to change back into a man again had flashed across my mind and almost made me forget there was one more question I wanted to ask Dan. Somehow it seemed very trivial now, hardly worth asking. But I asked it anyway.

"I can't see how Brindley could have failed to find the document," I said. "He must have searched the desk and made a painstaking examination of the entire study before he left the house."

"He did," Dan said. "But not a *completely* thorough one—if you mean by that the kind of examination that he would have made tomorrow, when everything of importance would have been transferred to his office. He even intended to go through everything again before he removed the contents of the desk. There were dozens of letters, other documents—the desk was crammed with them. Naturally, he didn't sit down and read them, one by one. It would have taken two or three hours to do that."

"And Doris found the document that mattered very quickly," I said. "Yes, what Hamlet said to Horatio could be very sound. Things that aren't dreamed of in our philosophy may be as numerous as a swarm of locusts. But I'd place my chips on just one strong-willed man like Margrave."

I stood up and walked back to where Doris was sitting and sat down beside her. I put my arm around her and drew her close again.

"Dan has told me a great many things I didn't know," I said. "But just the fact that we can sit here quietly like this and feel that it's all in the past—forever behind us now—is the only really important thing. I was a little afraid we might not be able to do that."

"And now you're sure we *can?*" she asked.

"Now I'm sure," I told her.

SPELLBINDING NOVELS OF ROMANTIC SUSPENSE

SIX QUEEN-SIZE GOTHICS for only $5.70

Take all six of these Queen-Size Gothics and enjoy hours of rich reading pleasure. These are novels of love and mystery, passion and terror, which have never appeared in paperback editions before—so mail in the coupon below today and be prepared to spend many thrilling hours.

1. **THE HOUSE ON WINDSWEPT RIDGE** by Katheryn Kimbrough. Vera Blake came to take possession of her birthright and instead found a heritage of ghastly fear.
2. **A SOUND OF DYING ROSES** by Jean-Anne De Pré. What Georgia Wellington found at Seven Elms was an indefinable atmosphere of menace . . . a blood-chilling mystery that grew more threatening with every moment.
3. **INHERIT THE SHADOWS** by Janet Lovesmith. A young girl trapped by ancient witchcraft, an eerie mansion, and a strange enthralling love. All the elements for suspenseful enjoyment.
4. **THE SILENCE** by Richard Hubbard. Buffie Rawls came to Wateredge in love and hope. Then one pulsing, breathless night all of her dreams and illusions were shattered.
5. **THE TWISTED CAMEO** by Katheryn Kimbrough. Had young Karen lived before in the old mansion or was it all an insane dream? What was this hidden, mysterious past?
6. **WHITE JADE** by Jan Alexander. The simple pendant around young Chris Channing's neck leads her to romance, fear and a startling secret.

MAIL ORDER DEPT.
Popular Library Publishers, 355 Lexington Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017

Please send me ______ sets of SPELLBINDING GOTHIC NOVELS @ $5.70 each set. I'm enclosing __________ and if not satisfied, I may return the books in good condition.

Name ____

Address ____

City ________________ State ________________ Zip ____________

**A YOUNG BEAUTY
STALKED BY
A MISBEGOTTEN BEAST FROM
THE NETHER WORLD . . .**

Deep inside a cave in Bulgaria they found the carved wooden head of a predatory wolf. For Professor Margrave, his beautiful daughter, Doris, and his colleague, John, it was a rare and priceless discovery. Yet only all too soon the very real and horrifying meaning of the talisman was revealed.

Soon afterwards the savage wolf-monster came to track them down—one by one. In the dead of night he waited—seeking revenge with viselike jaws and jagged saber teeth that tore his victims to shreds and left in his wake a terrifying trail of blood.

THE FRANKENSTEIN HORROR SERIES is a group of entirtely new stories that follow the fates of the primal monsters and their heirs, as they re-emerge from the Pit of the Unknown, the Unspeakable and the Undead.

FIRST TIME IN PAPERBACK

POPULAR LIBRARY

POPULAR LIBRARY

THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF

Frank Belknap Long

445-01562-075

445-01562-075

75

FRANKENSTEIN HORROR SERIES

THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF

by Frank Belknap Long

Out of the depths emerged the giant wolf-creature—come to destroy all who stood in his monstrous path.